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FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINES
3 Big Novelets
TOWN OF WHISPERING GUNS
by TOM BLACKBURN
LADY BUSHWACK
by HARRISON BENJAMIN
OUTSIDE THE LAW!
by JOHN JO CARPENTER
TOM HORN—LAWMAN AND RENEGADE
His ornery six-gun dispensed a weird brand of range-justice
A TRUE STORY OF THE OLD WEST

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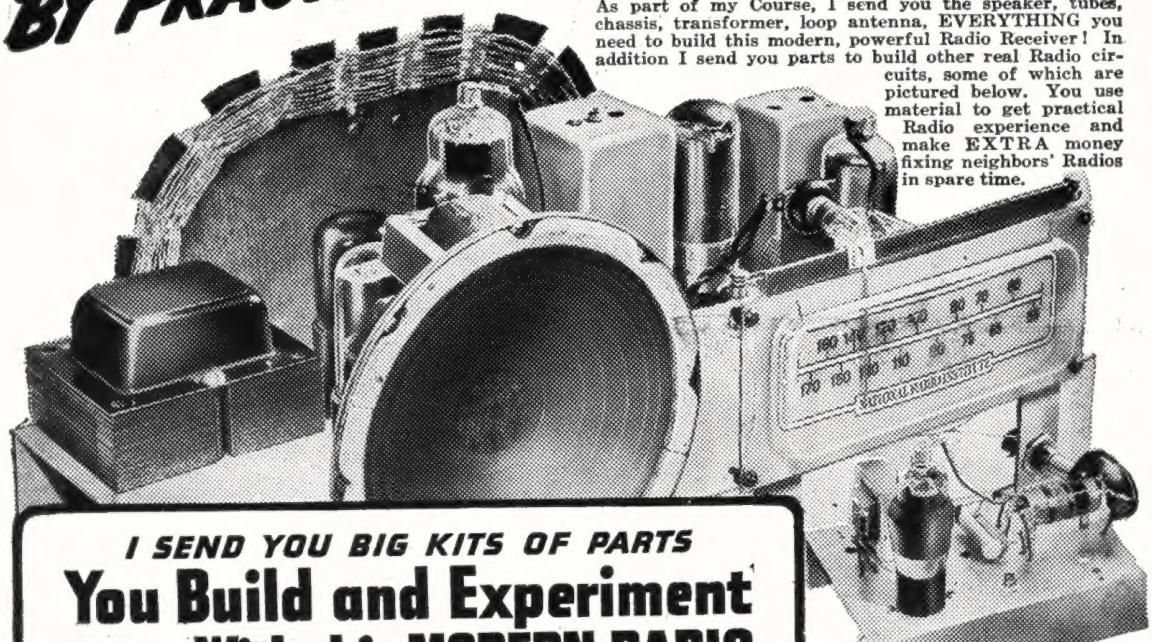

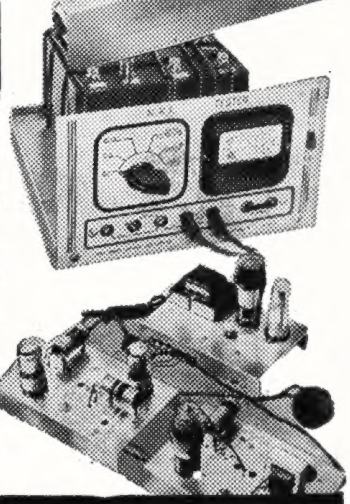

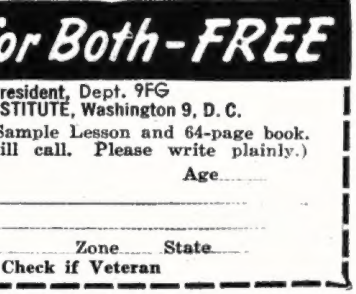

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Four Big Rangeland Novelets

OUTSIDE THE LAW . . . . . **John Jo Carpenter** 4
This is the intriguing story of a cowtown bum—Doc Ochiltree—who had 12 hours to beat town. He galloped out quicker than expected—in the bosom of an outlaw gang . . . and he rode back in first citizen of the land.

LADY BUSHWACK . . . . . **Harrison Benjamin** 44
Where a blonde bombshell is on the move; where she's proddin' trigger-happy gunnies with a sly smile and a fond hope . . . there you'll find smoke and fight and bullets—and a cowman's paradise turned into a graveyard for gunswifts.

RAMROD OF HANGROPE RANGE . . . . . **Joseph Chadwick** 71
Get yourself a fast horse, a hot runnin' iron and loud-talkin' Owlhoot guns when the sign reads *Cattle War* . . . for all neutrals are buzzard-bait.

TOWN OF WHISPERING GUNS . . . . . **Tom W. Blackburn** 92
It was the kind of fight Cole Layden liked—one bitter gun-hand against a hardbitten crew that was destroying the town. Yet no one reckoned Layden would be around long enough to enjoy the scrap.

A Top-Hand Western Feature

TOM HORN—LAWMAN AND RENEGADE . . . . . **Ben Capps** 21
Was he bushwack killer or peerless lawdog? The vilest badman to fork leather or a respectable Sir Galahad of the Old West? There's much disagreement, but even those who hated him most endowed him with admirable characteristic—nerve.

Four Fast Short Stories

POT-LUCK . . . . . **Robert L. Trimnell** 27
ALL GOLD CANYON . . . . . **Jack London** 32
DRY DEATH . . . . . **Ray Mason** 65
TOP-HAND HANNIBAL . . . . . **Harry Golden** 83

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NORTHWEST ROMANCES

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(FROM A LETTER BY E. S. JORDAN, DETROIT, MICH.)

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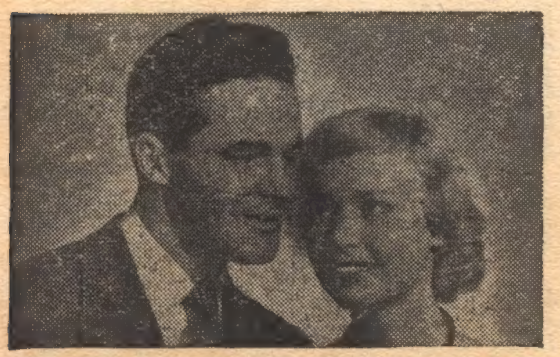

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OUTSIDE THE LAW

By JOHN JO CARPENTER

This is the intriguing story of a cowtown bum, Doc Ochiltree, who had twelve hours to beat town. He galloped out quicker than expected—in the bosom of an outlaw gang . . . and, miraculously, he rode back in crowned first citizen of the land.

THE TOWN of Jellico broiled like a piece of tough, grass-fat flank meat under the Arizona sun. It was hard to believe, looking at the single block of dried-out, false-front buildings, writhing through the heat waves, that Jellico was the capital of an empire. But there never was anything snobbish about money. It came here because of the surrounding ocean of grass.

The price of cattle was high that year.

Men, on the other hand, were cheap.

One of the cheapest emerged unsteadily from the side door of the cool adobe courthouse about ten o'clock that morning, and watched the crazily writhing waves in the heated air.

In his brain, which had been a good one once, other waves were dancing, distorting things and producing mirages.

His hand, which had been a good one once, trembled like a cottonwood leaf when he raised it to rub his sleep-matted eyes.

Carrying clearly, a gunshot made a flat sound and died away. The man heard it but he had been soaking his body and brain in cheap alcohol for a long time, and a keg of dynamite exploding could not have stirred him.

Doc Ochiltree had come to the end of the road.

At the flattish sound of the gunshot, a man inside the courthouse threw down his cards and kicked back his chair and bolted outside. He almost knocked Doc Ochiltree down but he did not stop to apologize. No one apologized to Doc Ochiltree.

Doc saw the man thump down the stone steps and recognized him for one of the deputy sheriffs, Bud McRae. He had been playing poker with Bud most of the night until he passed out along about three-thirty in the morning.

Bud had a streak of Sioux Indian in him, and some Scotch, but mostly he was Swedish. He came from Wisconsin and had been putting off sending back there for his childhood sweetheart.

Bud had taken a drink or two during the long night game. He had forgotten something pretty important. He ran a little way and then came back.

"Forgot my gun," he panted.

That showed the shape his wits were in. Doc had a gun in a side holster over his hip—a long-barreled .44. Bud grabbed it without further apology and ran toward the railroad station.

"Hell of a hurry," Doc murmured indistinctly.

He started slowly down the steps, with the gait of an old man. But he was not old—not in years, that is. He had come to the end of the road a little before his thirty-eighth birthday.

He went weaving down the street. Movement cleared his head. He hated to have his head clear because he hated himself.

Another gunshot sounded, and then a train whistle. Doc was now able to recognize the gun as his own, the whistle as the ten-ten Flyer.

He lived in a little shanty back of the town a quarter of a mile. He had come here a few years ago to recover from two serious ailments—tuberculosis and pride. He had thought Dorothy Wall was his, clear up to the last minute. Turned out she wasn't.

He got to the postoffice just as the postmaster ran out. Cy Evers, the postmaster, had one short leg. Doc grabbed him.

"Cy," he said, with a trace of his old-time charm, "what day of the month is it?"

Cy jerked loose, cursing, and ran toward the depot. Over his shoulder he

Rip had the nerve of a cornered rat. He pulled his gun and smashed downward at Opie's head.

yelled, "you got your remittance last week and already drunk it up like a hog. Don't come around again until I send for you."

"I was afraid that was the case," Doc murmured.

Something was going on down at the depot. Something bad, but he didn't care. He was reeling across the street when five horses thundered toward him. He stood there, gaping in terror as they split around him, two on one side and three on the other, so close he could smell the horse-sweat.

They almost knocked him down but, as they said in Jellico before another hour had passed, Dr. Thad Ochiltree was born to hang or die of the snakes.

THOSE were five good horses, powerful, fast and tough. In front of the saddle of the first hung two stout gunny-sacks with their throats wired together, a heavy lump in the bottom of each balancing each other. Money, of course.

The man on this horse was big and dark, with a huge nose, huge eyebrows, a short, cruel slit of a mouth. He looked like a man born to ride but nevertheless he had his left hand entangled in his horse's mane.

The five got past Doc and he saw why the leader was hanging on. The lower, right side of his green-and-yellow checked shirt was soaked with blood.

"Perforation of the Spigelian lobe of the liver. Probably fatal. Peritonitis will get him if hemorrhage doesn't. Interesting how he can ride with that hole in him," Doc observed.

He reeled on down to his shanty, kicked off his boots, and fell down across his stinking bed. He was sound asleep, drenched with sweat, when three citizens shook him awake an hour later. One was Cy Evers. The other two he knew for "solid citizens" of Jellico but he had not bothered to remember the names of solid citizens latterly.

Wasn't necessary for his path never crossed theirs.

"Did you get a good look at them?" they asked, making him sit up, making him listen, ignoring his sickness, headache and alcoholic terror.

"I got a good look at one. Shot through the liver. A good surgeon might save him but—"

"Was it Opie O'Brien?" Cy shook him painfully. "Damn yuh, Doc, yuh been around here long enough to remember Opie O'Brien! Was it him. Nobody else got a good look."

Doc held his head and thought hard. He could remember the man's gun-damaged anatomy clearly, and the sweaty horse smell, and the breeze they kicked up coming so close. The face, now—

"Why yes, I believe it was!" he exclaimed thickly, remembering the big nose, twisted small mouth, bushy eyebrows. "I can state with confidence that it was Opie O'Brien."

One of the men pushed him back on the bed.

"Goes to show you," he said. "Keeps Bud McRae up all night drinkin' and gamblin', makes Bud forget his own gun, makes Bud go down there with that old .44 and leaves this carrion without no gun a-tall when he's the only man in town could get a crack at 'em. Doc's a curse, not just a shame and a disgrace but a pus-running sore that pizens everything around him. We orta run him outa town on a rail weeks before."

Doc opened his eyes.

"I resent that," he said without resentment. "And by the way Bud McRae got my gun. Where is he? Where is it?"

Cy Evers tossed the gun down on the bed without smiling.

"Bud's dead. The bank was sending out eight thousand in gold coin on the Flyer this morning. It was down there in the depot. These hombres came in from the other side of town, got to the depot without bein' seen. They killed Bill Bricknell, the agent, and they killed Bud when like a fool he went after them."

"Too bad," Doc murmured. "Too bad! Thanks for bringing back my gun. All I got left. All I got left, gen'lemen, is my gun—and my honor."

Cy spat.

"Lissen to this, Doc," he said. "That girl of Bud's got in town on that same train. She got tired o' waitin' for him. She didn't have no way of knowin' you been fleecin' him of every cent he earned

for the last year. Train gets in five minutes after these five thieves hit the depot, and she gets off and sees Bud layin' there dead. You can thank yourself for that, and you can take just twelve hours to get to hell outa town."

"Thank you," Doc said courteously. "Tragic about the girl. Deeply sorry. Affected more than I can say! Kindest regards for returning my weapon. All I own—gun and my honor, Ochiltree honor. Thank you for—twelve hours, did you say?"

They did not answer. He did not hear them leave. He was only a stone's throw from the graveyard and he did not even hear them bring Bud McRae and Bill Bricknell up that afternoon for burial.

As for the twelve-hour ultimatum to leave the country, he paid no attention to it. A man couldn't leave the end of his road. No place to go.

About dusk he got up and straightened his rumpled clothing a little. He washed his face and tried to remember when he had shaved last. He had not eaten in three or four days. He needed food badly . . . . . .

"Can't present myself in the hotel dining room in this condition," he decided.

He forced himself to shave, an operation that took a whole hour. He was almost presentable when he slid the .44 into its holster and walked, with a fairly steady gait, down to the Desert Anchor hotel.

He seated himself and ordered a rare steak, lots of chopped raw onions, and three shots of rye whiskey in one glass with baking soda water on the side.

"You know we don't serve liquor in the dining room," the waitress whispered.

"You know that they serve me liquor anywhere!"

"Not tonight."

The waitress jogged his elbow and he looked across the room and saw a girl sitting there.

SHE wasn't more than eighteen or nineteen. She was small and blond and innocent-looking, and by her dress the daughter of hard-working, not very prosperous people. Her eyes were red from crying and Mrs. Evers, who sat with her, had to make her take bites of her food.

"Bud McRae's intended, you scum," the waitress whispered. "Think I'm gonna serve you a drink in front of her? Not by a damsite."

The waitress marched away. Her name was Rose Fallon, and she was twenty-two, but she had the wisdom, the ability to protect herself, of a person twice that. She had dark good looks that drew men, and a scornful self-sufficiency that scared them away. She was free with her tongue but men minded their own around Rose. She had a good heart, and in it there had always been a little pity for Doc Ochiltree, enough so she'd serve him the hair of the dog with his meals.

But not tonight.

Tonight Doc had to sit there and eat his rare steak and raw onions without his medicine. He had to sit and look at a woebegone, bereaved, helpless, innocent chick of a girl who had stepped off the Flyer hoping to walk into the arms of her lover—

Instead he lay there bleeding to death on the depot platform.

"The God of justice will assess Bud McRae with the charge of having no brains when judgment comes," Rose Fallon whispered in Doc's ear, "but you'll carry his corpse around your neck through the hottest aisles in hell because you were the corrupter who tried to drag him down to your own level."

"No man," Doc said, "could get down to my level unless he had brains, Rose. It takes intelligence to be as low as I am. The salt, please. This steak lived too long before death and laid too long afterward."

Rose shook her head, spattering tears, and called him another hard name. She said, "Oh, I don't blame you directly, Thad, like some others in this town. People are upset and looking for a scapegoat, and you're it. All I blame you for is being completely no good."

"Thank you," he said.

He finished his steak and went out. A man he remembered as one of those solid citizens said, "Time's running short, Doc." He took a short cut back to the hotel and saw Rose through the window, leaning in

a dark corner of the hallway to the kitchen and crying.

A fat woman came up and put her arm around Rose and said, "I never see the beat of you! An' don't like—you're cryin' because the town's got it in for Doc Ochiltree."

"When I was a kid," Rose said, drying her eyes, "I used to bring home stray dogs."

Doc went in before he could quite hear what the fat woman said. His head was clear enough now for him to know that Rose Fallon was worth a dozen Dorothy Walls.

But it was the end of the road for him, and he knew that too. He thought of leaving town; he certainly did not desire what was certainly coming if he didn't leave within the time limit.

But in the first place, he was tired and sick and out of liquor. In the second, he thought maybe if Rose Fallon saw the town take things into their own hands, she'd get over feeling sorry for him.

He lay down with his clothes and the .44 still on him and went to sleep.

II

HE THOUGHT it was the solid citizens for a long time. Somebody shook him awake. Somebody else said, "Well, let him go back to sleep then. It's just as well." Somebody picked him up and carried him out of the shanty.

Next thing he knew he was on a horse and begging to be allowed to stop. He was sore all over, his head throbbed, and he couldn't see clearly. Every nerve in his body cried out for a drink.

There were three of them. He had never seen any of them before. One, called Sarge, was short and blond and square-built. One, called Massey, was short and wiry, with small, mean eyes and a mustache that didn't quite hide his bad teeth—yellow, crooked teeth that gave him an animal-like appearance. The third, Rip, looked like any weak-spirited cowboy out of a job.

They were riding hard, and it was almost daylight, and they were moving up and up and up, into the Monuments. A few years ago, Doc had hunted this same territory, during the green winter months.

When he tried to stop his horse they whipped it on. When he leaned back on the reins the one called Sarge clouted him over the side of the head. They took the reins away from him, tied his hands to the saddle horn, and led him like a piece of baggage on a packsaddle.

He knew it wasn't the solid citizens of Jellico, then. Pretty soon he remembered the five who had helped themselves to eight thousand in gold, and who had killed Bill Bricknell and Bud McRae.

They didn't talk. They stopped now and then for a swig of warm water from their canteens. Chinless Rip carried one of Doc's own gunny-sacks, with groceries filched or bought somewhere. Massey had on his saddle horn something Doc hadn't seen in quite a while—a black bag, his own black bag, full of drugs and medicines and surgical tools.

Doc had never been clouted over the head before. No man had ever laid hands on him that way. It went clear through the liquor-haze and made him hate again.

Hatred cleared his head. After a while he said, "Opie's got the constitution of a range bull but I saw where Bud plugged him and you're wasting your time and mine."

Sarge grinned.

"What makes you think so, Sawbones?"

Doc grinned back, a sick grin but it would still pass for one.

"Because it takes expert care, quite a bit of skill, to give his bull constitution the chance it needs. I am no longer expert and furthermore I don't intend to do anything."

"You'll do what's required, Doc, an' let's don't make any mistakes about that. Opie's got to pull through."

Massey, behind them, began swearing. Sarge's heavy, brutal, red face grew sullen. Massey snarled, "It's your fault. I can't watch everything. I told you to keep an eye on him."

They quarreled about whose fault it was and Doc began to understand. Opie had been leader of the gang but Massey furnished the real brains. His only mistake, apparently, had been in taking com-

mand as they entered the Monuments. Massey had led the way, leaving Sarge to keep an eye on the wounded Opie.

It was plain enough what had happened. Doc remembered Opie O'Brien when Opie came to Jellico a few years ago and started up in business as a horse-breaker. He did all right until people discovered he was using dopes, Spanish tricks, ruining a horse so that it was wall-eyed or spiritless the rest of its life.

Opie was a big, powerful man but he had more craft and guile in him than his heavy form might suggest. Opie, wounded, knew about how much chance he had with his four companions up here in the Monuments. They'd be tickled to death to see him die. Eight thousand split five ways was sixteen hundred apiece; split four ways, each man got another four hundred.

While Massey's back was turned Opie had ditched the two heavy bags of money somewhere. When he could ride out as a well man again he'd show them where it was.

"He sent for you," Sarge said. "He told us, 'Get Thad Ochiltree. I seen him operate on a Nebraska feller with a bullet in his lung. Doc Ochiltree can pull me through'."

Doc tried to remember the Nebraskan. Probably that kid shot in the alley back of the Desert Anchor. He smiled. He had been pretty good, then . . . . But the joke was on Opie because he hadn't stuck around Jellico to see booze and self-pity get the best of Doc.

THE IDEA of Opie depending on him tickled Doc. It helped him forget the clout on the head Sarge had given him.

Each time they reached a place where they could look backward and downward toward Jellico, the three men pulled up.

"Can't understand it. How come they ain't after us?" they kept worrying.

It was no mystery to Doc. Sarge and Massey and Rip couldn't know, of course, that they blamed Doc for what had happened to Bud. They didn't know that they had kidnapped him out of his shanty just an hour and ten minutes before the deadline expired.

About midnight, a deputation had probably visited the shanty and found Doc and his affects gone. Later today, someone would go back to make sure he stayed away.

Then, and not until then, the tracks of Sarge and Massey and Rip might be discovered. There was a possibility they could put two and two together.

He thought of Rose Fallon, and how it would hurt her if her latest lost dog turned up among Bud McRae's killers after what had happened down there at the depot.

How he stayed in the saddle that long, he would never know. When the quarter-mile walk from the 'dobe courthouse to his shanty almost exhausted him, it was hard to believe he could stay alive on a horse more than an hour or so.

Yet he was still alive, awake, and clear-headed when, shortly before dark, Massey hailed the high canyon ahead of them and a man came out carrying a rifle.

"*Hey-ooooo, Gordon!*" Massey yelled, and the man waved the rifle and came running down toward them.

Doc had not been entirely aware of what went on around him for a long time. He took a look around now as the man approached. He had never been this high, this far away before. It was still the same old Arizona—hot, rocky, almost without vegetation. They were lost up here in these towering granite pillars like grains of rice in a wagon load of rock.

"How is he, Gordon?"

"Outa his head," Gordon panted.

Massey's face brightened.

"Say anything?"

"He didn't give a thing away."

Massey's face fell.

"Come on." They rode on another hundred yards and Massey got off his horse. "Sarge, you and Rip help the sawbones down. I'll see Opie. Gordon, take care of the horses."

He was the acknowledged boss of the gang now that Opie was disabled, although Sarge took his orders reluctantly. They lifted Doc down and let him drink the last of the water. He could hear a spring bubbling and trickling musically nearby but they let him drink warm canteen water that gagged him.

"Come on and stir your stumps while there's light left."

Opie lay on a comfortable enough pallet and they had built a shade of brush that held off the sun and let in the breeze. They hated his guts but he was worth money to them, and they had given him what care they could.

Massey was kneeling over the wounded man. He looked up and said, "I don't think he's clear outa his head. I think he's playin' possum. Doc, make him well so I can personally shoot him after I find where he stashed that specie. I been over every foot of that trail—"

Doc made them bring him water to wash his hands. He cursed them because there was no soap. He took his time, and when Sarge clouted him he sat down and shook his head.

"No man lays a hand on me," he said. "I'll see you all in hell first."

Sarge started at him again but Massey jumped between them. He didn't have time to argue with the big man. He picked up a rock as he jumped. He threw it at short range.

The rock, the size of a turkey-egg, hit Sarge on the bone under his right eye. He dropped like a pole-axed steer and kicked and threshed and moaned. When he knew what he was doing he started to get up, big hands clenching to shape themselves around Massey's throat.

Massey grinned and showed his yellow stump teeth. His hand held his .45 firmly and he said, "No more of that, Sarge, or I'll blow a hole in your guts. Apologize to the doc."

Sarge stabbed at his gun, half dizzy from the blow. Massey stiffened and jerked the trigger. Opie, on his pallet of grass and brush and extra shirts and coats, twitched and opened his eyes at the double boom-boom of the gun.

Sarge gurgled and twisted and went over backward, dying hard. Massey lifted the gun and looked around and said, "Anything to add, Gordon—Rip? He was gettin' too big for his britches and the damn fool couldn't think anyway. He let Opie hide the specie and he made the doc mad. I say the doc is boss until Opie's well. Suit you?"

The chinless, vacant-eyed Rip said, "Suits me, Massey," and Gordon cleared his throat and muttered, "You know how I felt about Sarge. It woulda been a pleasure to do it to him."

"Get rid of him." Massey holstered the gun and turned to Doc. "You need a drink. You can have all you want—after Opie's well. You can have one good snort after you take care of him tonight."

"First," Doc said, although the spit-springs vented hungrily in his mouth at thought of a drink, "I've got an apology coming for twice when hands were laid on me."

Massey nodded.

"I been watchin' you. You're a crazy coot. All right, I apologize. No more monkey-business now. Get busy for that drink or I'll take care of you and not with my hand."

Doc went over and knelt beside Opie. Massey himself had done that job of bandaging. It wasn't professional but it showed brains. Doc peeled back the sticky bandages and marvelled—not at Opie's bull vitality but at himself. He had put an apology ahead of a drink.

"First," he said, "who killed McRae?"

Gordon and Rip had taken Sarge's heavy body away for burial. Doc and Massey were alone, except for the inert patient between them.

"Opie did," Massey said. "Why?"

"It was my gun McRae shot Opie with."

HE WAS oddly clear-headed but in no hurry to begin the delicate, nerve-wracking job of probing Opie's ugly wound. He went weak and shaky every time he thought of that drink but he kept thinking of Rose Fallon and McRae's girl. He couldn't see Rose's face clearly but the little, blue-eyed girl with the hopeless, heartsick look was quite plain in his mind.

"Let's get busy, Doc," Massey's voice reminded him.

"I don't trust myself, but there's no time to get anyone else," Doc said deliberately. "The chances are my hand will slip and I'll kill Opie. If that doesn't happen he'll probably die of peritonitis because that's the usual result of these wounds. You've made a lot of mistakes

in judgment, my friend, and you've got one chance in a thousand he'll live."

"Then let's get busy," Massey repeated.

Doc took his time, however. He opened his kit and sat there a long time, staring in the half-light at things he hadn't seen in a long time. Rip and Gordon came back, and he made them light big fires all around, to give him light. Massey, the long-headed, had kept Gordon boiling water all afternoon.

He cut into Opie and saw that it wasn't as bad as he thought. It had missed the liver—had missed all vital organs, as a matter of fact. Loss of blood, exhaustion, infection—these were Opie's enemies and the allies of death.

He knew when Opie regained consciousness under the knife. There was opium in the kit but he let Opie suffer it out. He found the slug and brought it out and put it in his pocket. He stitched Opie up again. Opie had fainted again but he came to as Doc was putting his instruments away. Their eyes met.

"Howdy, Doc," Opie said, wheezing. "I told the boys you'd pull me out. They killed Sarge, didn't they? Make 'em give you his share, then."

Doc didn't answer. He went ahead putting his instruments away. His nerve was beginning to cave in and so was his body. His hand shook and the instruments clinked. Slowly, Opie understood how it was with Doc Ochiltree, and how far he had slipped since Opie left Jellico.

The look of fear on the wounded man's face made Massey jump up and grab Doc by the shoulder.

"How about that drink now?" Doc said, knowing he couldn't hold out much longer.

Massey gripped Doc's shoulder painfully while he made up his mind.

"All right. One good one. You need it. Gordon, gimme the bottle."

"Massey, I hate to tell you this," Gordon said, "but the bottle's busted. Sarge sneaked it in his pocket and it busted when you shot him."

Massey cursed. Doc put his head in his hands and began laughing. It was crazy laughter, a hysterical ringing sound that echoed through the dark and set his own teeth on edge.

Massey lifted his hand to clout Doc but he remembered in time—he took a look at Opie and considered all the mistakes that had been made so far, and how badly they needed to find that money so they could get out of the country.

Doc kept on laughing. He came of a good family and had a brilliant mind up to the time Dorothy Wall turned him down.

For quite a while the events in which Dorothy Wall figured had been foggy in his mind. Perhaps he had deliberately fogged them, but for some reason he remembered clearly enough now.

He had been engaged to Dorothy back home in Ohio. Then a scandal broke—the whole town found out Dorothy had been unfaithful for a whole year. It was Doc's last year in medical school, and the man was his own boyhood chum, his best friend.

Even at that he asked her to marry him but she turned him down. She said, "Any man that would marry the girl that double-crossed him with his own best friend is a worm and I wouldn't marry a worm. You're not half a man, Thad."

All those events came tumbling back into his mind as he sat there beside Opie, liquorless and lost and laughing like a fool. A bold, crooked-minded girl had pulled the trigger which sent him up here in the Monuments for the end of things.

"Get holt of yourself! You got Opie scared to death. He's bleedin' through the bandages!" came Massey's snarl.

Doc leaned over his patient again. He was in bad shape but if Dorothy Wall had been there he would have given her the answer he had failed to crack back at her those years before.

He had not told Dorothy about his discovery that he had it in the lungs, or his plan for them to go West together and cure what ailed both of them that way. No, she called him a worm, and he let it go that way, until he got around to believing it himself.

But the joke was on Dorothy. Of course, if Opie died, it was on him, too. But if Opie survived, the joke was on Dorothy . . . . . and on a lot of people.

Because it would take Opie quite a while to get well, and all that time Doc would

be on the wagon. It wasn't the end of the road after all. He said, "The worm has turned, Dorothy. Against its own will, but turned nevertheless."

"What was that?" Massey said.

"Nothing," Doc answered. "Hand me my kit."

III

OPIE lived.

Opie might shoot a horse full of ginger extract, morphine and nitroglycerine drops, but he had been careful what he put into his own body. A small beer, but no hard liquor; Opie disliked work and to live by his wits required clear wits.

He had a bull body and he had taken good care of it. He went out of his head the second day and stayed delirious forty hours straight, while the hole through his side festered and turned black and throbbed with agony.

Doc wrote an order to a Bisbee drug house. Gordon took it down and slipped it into the postoffice at Jellico by night, and came back with a deputy and five special deputies fogging at his heels.

He lost them by following Massey's orders implicitly. He doubled at the right place, reached the right place as dark fell, walked off leading his horse and left them eight miles away.

When Gordon rode in he found Massey still crouched beside the delirious Opie, waiting for him to say something to betray where the two big sacks of gold coin were hidden. But Opie talked about the money without ever saying where it was.

All that day Massey had crouched there, biting his mustache with eagerness. All that day Doc had lain prone beside his patient, suffering for liquor, but with less agony than he had expected. He kept thinking of Rose Fallon, of wanting to walk up and say to her, "Here's one stray that turned out to be a useful dog, Miss Fallon." He had never called her that before. He always called her by her first name, same as everyone.

All that day, while Massey crouched and Doc lay beside Opie, Rip had been out on foot at Massey's orders. He came in with Gordon and said, "Massey, I walked over every foot of that. He didn't get off'n his horse and it's in plain sight somewhere, but I can't find it."

"I didn't think you would," Massey said.

He was boss now, and with Gordon and Rip obeying implicitly there was a feeling of confidence, less fear, more optimism. Doc could sense it even through his own fog. His body, he felt, was slowly drying out. He drank quarts of water from the spring. He smoked cigarettes almost as fast as he could roll them.

It was agony, but he could enjoy a joke on himself as well as one on someone else, and the funniest thing in the world was for Thad Ochiltree to be on the wagon.

Evening fell with a chill, and while Gordon told how things were down in Jellico, Doc took care of his patient again. He reopened the wound and put in a drain, and though his hand was unsteady a lot of his old skill was back.

"There's a reward out for Doc," Gordon said, grinning. "They figgered out where he is. They think now he was in on it with Opie. You get some money from your family back east, don't you?"

"A few dollars every month, yes," Doc said.

"Well, they know you spent the last of it and they figger you was makin' yourself a stake. Doc, you're worth five hundred dollars in Jellico, dead or alive."

"Five hundred!" Doc murmured. "That's not very complimentary. How much for Opie?"

"The same."

"When cattle are high," Doc said, "men are cheap. In a pinch, Massey, you could probably make a deal with the solid citizens of Jellico. You've got a thousand dollars right here. Of course it's not eight, but—"

By the look on Gordon's face it was plain he had been thinking the same thing. He didn't have Massey's long-headed willfulness. "I'll take the eight thousand, thanks," Massey grunted. "How's Opie?"

Opie opened his eyes as Doc folded the cover over the wound.

"I'll live to eat the chicken that scratches on my grave, Massey," he whispered. "I know what's in your mind. You're sore because I double-crossed you by hiding the stuff. You think you'll collect it and get

me afterward. Guess again, Massey. I run this gang once with you in it. I'll run it again and I don't care whether you're in it or not. I'll be in shape before you lay hands on that money."

Massey knew it was no use arguing. No use telling Opie he had misjudged. It was pretty plain they were sitting around like vultures. Only they were waiting for Opie to get well, instead of to die.

"What worries me," Rip said timidly, "is how we're goin' to get those drugs Doc ordered."

Massey pulled his mustache.

"That would worry me, too," he murmured, "only I think Doc's got his own ideas. Doc, when you take on a patient, you want him to live don't you?"

"That's right."

"Kind of an obligation on a doc no matter who the patient is?"

"That's right."

"Got to place your patient's welfare first." Massey nodded. "When do you expect them drugs?"

"On day after tomorrow's train. And I'll need them at once. Need them now."

"Day after tomorrow. That's Sunday."

"Sunday it is," Doc said cheerfully.

OPIE was worse again the next day, and so was Doc. Being on the wagon was both a joke and a game at first, but Saturday was a blazing hot one and there was nothing to do but sit beside Opie. Opie's breath came in long, rasping growling heaves. His lips were cracked with fever and the whites of his eyes showed through the parted lids.

They couldn't go over the back-trail and hunt for the hidden coin, either, because the Monuments swarmed with men. Two deputies rode slowly through the jumble of rocks less than a half-mile from where Opie lay that Saturday afternoon. Gordon lay on his belly on a rocky shelf and followed them with his rifle.

But the two men had run out of food and water. If they saw anything but their own hunger and thirst, they didn't show it. They rode on out of sight, and Gordon lowered the gun.

They kept careful watch that night, while Opie lay in coma and Doc dozed on his haunches beside him. Morning came—Sunday morning. Gordon scouted until noon and reported that the posse had headed back to Jellico.

"Prob'ly think we kept on goin'," he opined cheerfully.

Massey shook his head.

"Not with a wounded man, not if we ordered drugs. They'll know he's still alive if we go after the drugs."

There was nothing said about it, but they all took it for granted that Doc would take Sarge's share of the money. He wasn't one of them but he had them over a barrel, and they knew it by now.

They left Rip with Opie this time, because Gordon had more sense, and going after the drugs required a man who could think. They left Sunday evening about dark, after Doc explained, over and over again, what Rip should do about Opie.

By morning they were approaching Jellico by the roundabout route, coming in from the other side so they'd hit the railroad station first. This was the same route by which Opie had led them into Jellico for the raid on the depot.

They tied their horses, and Massey said, "Doc, I'll remind you just once more that there's a price on your head and you'll get no mercy here. On the other hand, you're worth two thousand dollars if you want to be. The drugs will be either in the railroad station or the postoffice, depending on whether they were shipped by mail or express. Both places will have a small army on guard. Don't you think it's time to say how you're going to do it?"

Anxiety made his whispering voice high and womanish. He could go along without asking questions up to a certain point, just as he expected Gordon and Rip to obey without external explanations. But too much hung on getting those drugs out safely.

"It's about time," Doc said. "And it's too late to argue now. We do it my way or we don't do it. I've got no friends here but I know one person who has lots of friends. I don't want any of them hurt. So—Gordon will stay with the horses and you and I will *walk* the rest of the way, and you'll leave your gun behind with Gordon."

Massey caught his breath sharply and looked toward the east, where the sky was threatening to break out with the gray of morning light. The drugs preyed on his mind; he said, "Doc, some day you and me will have plenty to settle but now let's get goin'." He peeled off his gun and handed it to Gordon, muttering, "I don't like this. I don't like it a bit! Which will it be—postoffice or depot?"

"Why, neither one," Doc said. "There's a drug store in the hotel and it's got everything I want. Matter of fact, it was my store once, but that's another story."

"Then this palaver—this risk sendin' out an order for drugs—"

"—Was less risky, both for us and the friends of my friend, than any other way. I'm ready if you are."

Less than a week had passed since he went reeling up the street through Jellico. He could already walk straight and steady now. The worm, coming to the end of the road, had turned sharply, and even if it was headed up another blind alley there was no longer any eagerness to die blindly in a blind place.

Even Massey, with his craft, his ability to look ahead, didn't fully appreciate Doc's guile until they were at the back door of the hotel. Doc pulled him into a corner, where they waited while a limping man knocked at the door. A woman—Rose Fallon—came to the door with a paper bag.

"No sign?" she said; and old Cy Evers said, "No sign of 'em. Rose. Could mean Opie died on their hands and they pulled out. For your sake, I'll hope that's what happened, though I'd like personally to take a bead on Doc. It's white of you, Rose, to fix san'widges. If they don't make their play in the next hour, it'll be too light."

He limped away with the bag of sandwiches and Massey understood. He swore and whispered, "There won't be a soul in the hotel but the girl! It just won't occur to them that we'd go to all the trouble of a decoy drug order, just to make sure we can get into the hotel supply."

"Of course," Doc whispered back. "Knowing we had a wounded man, they would have kept a twenty-four hour watch over the drugs here."

He opened the back door softly and stepped inside, Massey on his heels. Rose Fallon came out of the shadows with a gun in her hand.

"I didn't think you were the kind of a doctor to lay in an incomplete drug stock," she gritted. Her hair was rumpled wildly around her face, which showed disgust, contempt. "And if you wanted to get a special order through to Bisbee it wouldn't be shoved under the door in your own handwriting. You could fool everybody in town but me, Doc, but you had fooled me once too often."

SHE called him another hard name. She talked too much, for Massey had kicked up and hit her wrist with the toe of his boot, and she was too interested in what she was saying to watch what she should have been watching. The arm went numb and Massey simply took the gun out of her hand. Like taking candy from a child.

Rose jumped at Doc, but Massey grabbed her and snarled, "Get what you need, Doc, and I'll hold her." Doc did not meet her eyes because all he could have said was that he had started to quit drinking—just started. He went into the hotel office, where the drugs had been stored, and helped himself to what he needed.

He did not try to talk to Rose, and somehow Massey knew that she must not be hurt. Somehow Massey knew that this was the one person Doc was concerned about. He seemed aware that if anything painful or insulting happened to Rose, Doc would sit down and let anything happen that wanted to happen.

He was rough but no rougher than he had to be. He tied her hands to a doorknob and wraped a towel around her mouth. She was yelling before they got back to their horses but it was all the start they needed.

Doc fell off his horse a mile from the hideout, exhausted. The next thing he knew he was lying by Opie's side. His first and last thoughts were of the loathing in Rose's eyes. Being on the wagon wasn't a game any more. He took care of his patient and that wasn't a game any more.

Pulling Opie through had become the most important thing in the world for reasons Doc didn't quite understand himself. Gone was his clear-headedness. All he had left was a feeling of shame, for what he had been, and for being rather proud of it.

"Get out!" he told Massey when the gang leader wanted to look over his shoulder.

Massey said, "Doc, you went just about far enough with me," but he got out, and Doc leaned over his patient and cursed deep in his throat, one bitter blasphemy after another. It seemed to him that if Opie lived, Doc could say that no matter what happened he had lived up to something. If he died—

IV

IT WAS the medicines from the hotel supply that did the trick. The raid brought possemen swarming through the Monuments like hornets, but their luck held, and Massey's genius at hiding his trail had been sufficient.

Men were still doggedly searching when Opie's fever went down. They were still ransacking the Monuments, though fewer in number, when Opie's healing wound scabbed over and began to itch as new flesh formed.

The square brown bottles were in all sizes, from a big heavy pint to tiny phials. Doc racked them up on a flat rock beside Opie and played on the ignorance of Massey and Gordon and Rip. Massey knew it was half medicial science, half theatrics, but he didn't know which half was which.

Doc was breeding hatred and he knew it and didn't care. The bottles mystified them but there was nothing they could do about it.

Opie laughed when they tried to question him about the money.

"If you ain't found it by now you won't find it without I lead you to it," he said in his weak, triumphant voice.

They tried threats and cajolery because all three were anxious to be moving. When Opie could be up and around again, when Doc said he could ride a horse in easy stages, they were eager to go. Opie laughed.

"Tell you where it is and have you back-shoot me the minute you find it? No, sir! When I show you the kitty I'm gonna have your weapons in my hand, and strength enough to go it alone."

"I won't deal that way," Massey said.

Opie laughed. He had lost leadership of the gang to Massey and it galled him. He burned inwardly because Massey called him a brainless fool. He laughed, perhaps too loudly, because the money was key to everything and he was the only one who knew where it was.

For Doc the days were weeks, the weeks were months, the month they clung there like snarling varmints was a lifetime. His body hardened again and he knew he would never need a drink or pity in his life, but he'd always have to live with himself.

He had let a woman like Dorothy Wall put him in a position where a man like Massey could lay hands on a girl like Rose Fallon, and he had to stand by and let it happen.

Five men in a small camp get on each other's nerves under the best conditions, and these weren't the best. They dared not wander far, because a few men from Jellico were still reward-hungry. They couldn't stay away from the Monuments while they held a possible thousand dollar reward.

A month of snarling was followed by dragging days of tight-lipped silence when they didn't dare speak with each other. Opie's gloating grin kept Massey raw-nerved. Opie exercised daily, so by the time the tenderness was gone from his wound he could take care of himself.

Opie was Doc's protector.

Doc knew he would have met the same fate as Sarge, long before this, except that Opie took him under his wing. And behind Opie was the money. That money kept them all disciplined.

"Good ol' Doc saved my life! I'll do the same for him. The minute anything happens to Doc, you can kiss the money goodbye," Opie said, and Massey had to take it. Massey couldn't do anything but take it.

"Your pants are out and you've been on

short rations so long you're thin as a rail," Opie taunted him. "You coulda made it outa Arizona when you had clothes and meat on your bones. Now you need the cash."

Massey had to take it. His long-headed thinking had brought them through this far, but the missing money was a stone wall. When Massey couldn't think his way around it he began to lose his grip on Rip and Gordon.

Doc could see the rival leaders contesting for Rip and Gordon's loyalty. Gordon was a level-headed, middle-aged man, but the strain was telling on him. Rip, with no character of his own, wavered however Gordon wavered.

But it was Gordon who cracked first. He went out with a rifle to try to find a rabbit. He came back about dark without the rabbit, carrying the gun in both hands and looking back over his shoulder in terror.

"They's a man out there, a man out there," he stammered. His teeth chattered until he could hardly talk. "I got a shot at this rabbit and I didn't see the man until he came right up to me and called me by my name."

Massey jumped and caught him on the point of the jaw with his fist. Gordon rocked back on his heels and shook the blindness out of his eyes. He came forward fighting. Massey jammed his .45 in Gordon's guts and stopped him.

"Now talk sense! The heat's got you. Where did you see a man? By the Eternal, Gordon, if you've led a posse here I'll drill you myself!"

Gordon sat down and began laughing. Doc watched with curiosity but no compassion. He was pretty sure what was wrong. Suddenly Gordon stood up and walked away, still laughing. Massey raised his eyebrows at Doc.

"Crazy?"

DOC nodded. He wasn't prepared for what Massey did. Massey lifted the gun, took careful aim, pulled the trigger. Gordon fell backward, hit in the spine. Opie and Rip jumped at Massey but he backed away and held them off with the gun.

"Go set down, you two. Mebbe I don't know where the money is but in this camp I'll be boss."

They sat down where he indicated. Gordon was dying hard. He had no feeling or motion in his body but his head was clear.

He could think but he couldn't talk.

Doc knelt beside him and shook his head. Massey, standing a little way off, asked, "Is he dead?" Doc said, "Massey, I'm saving something pretty bad for you and I don't think you're going to have to wait very long."

Massey, as always seeing a little ahead, took the trouble to slide a new cartridge into the .45.

"What're you savin' for me, Doc?"

He came over and looked down with his bad teeth bared in a yellow, ugly smile. Gordon was slipping fast but his eyes still showed life.

"Get this, Doc," Massey whispered. "I liked Gordon and I didn't want to do it, but the heat got him. Opie wouldn't have the nerve or the quick wit to see it had to be done. You can't have a crazy man in camp. It was Gordon or us. That's why I done it."

Doc said nothing.

"You said yourself he was crazy," Massey insisted.

"He *was* crazy, Massey," Doc answered slowly, "but he's not crazy now. Where you made your mistake was in believing that what a crazy man said was crazy, too. I'm pretty sure Gordon did see a man."

"You're *what?*"

"Well, look at his eyes. Gordon, your head is clear now. You got scared and lost your nerve, but you did see someone, didn't you?"

Gordon died before their eyes. But along with the death-rattle came something in his eyes like a gleam of mirth. He couldn't talk, but with a look he laughed at Massey, whose shot would draw anyone straight to their carefully hidden camp.

Massey raised the gun again and Doc stood up and shook his head.

"Go ahead and shoot, Massey," he said quietly. "Maybe you didn't give it away when you shot Gordon. Maybe you've

still got a chance. You won't have if you shoot me."

Opie and Rip came up, and the four of them stood over the dead man, listening.

In a minute, a gun boomed, not far away. They kept on listening until, with deadly regularity of spacing, two more shots crashed. No mistaking the character of these three. This was gun-talk, a signal. It was a call for help.

In another minute two faraway, flattish reports crackled, and this time it was Opie and Rip whose nerve crumpled. In a tight spot, Massey's mind worked the best. He lost his crazy mad look. His eyes were cool and steady.

"We're in a tight spot, and that's a fact, but we're just as well off as we were before, if you think it out," he said.

"Now we've got to stick together. Opie, you've got to turn up the money now. We'll whack it quick—you won't get away with all of it alone now. Doc, you're in it with us, split and split. I'll drill you if you won't go along but don't worry if you do—we may need you again. The truest thing ever said is that we've got to stick together and that's it, that's all, that's our last chance."

Opie's mind worked more laboriously. The hidden money had been his ace in the hole for a long time, but if he didn't think fast as Massey, he could still think. The white-faced Rip could only nod.

"All right," Opie said. He whirled suddenly and grabbed Doc's shoulders. "If yuh double-cross us—"

Massey thrust between them.

"Don't worry about Doc. An' Doc, don't get any ideas about what you *'saved'* for me. You wouldn't have a second chance. It's two thousand dollars or what Sarge and Gordon got. You won't have a gun. What do you say?"

"What can I say?" Doc countered, grinning.

Massey jammed his gun into Doc's stomach.

"That ain't good enough."

"It's all you'll get from me. You said it yourself—I have no choice."

"I want it yes or no, Doc."

"Or what? You haven't got a whole lot of time, Massey."

They stared at each other over the gun. Doc thought he knew what Massey would do, and it didn't matter much if it turned out he was wrong.

It turned out he was right. Doc saw Massey decide, in his eyes, to make the best of it. The gun came down.

"Go get the money, Opie. Rip, you go with him. You'll come back! I'll take a look around. Come along, Doc."

Opie and Rip untied the gaunt horses, mounted without saddles, and set off. Massey knowing Opie couldn't ride fast, started after them afoot, motioning Doc to follow.

"You're a smart feller, Doc. It's between you and me if we want to make it that way. You worry me with what you said about savin' somethin' for me but I'll worry you more when my turn comes. I want you to be on my side, Doc."

"I'm not on anybody's side."

Massey shut up. He skulked along after Opie and Rip, motioning Doc to follow. Doc followed.

A MILE from the camp Opie O'Brien pulled up beside a tall, coffin-shaped rock that towered several feet over his head. He pointed upward. Massey swore.

"I looked in every chuck-hole, rabbit-hole and badger den he could have dropped them bags in," he said. "He's a bull for strength. He threw that money up there with a hole like that in him and all his blood leakin' out!"

They moved in closer so they could hear.

"It's up there, Rip," Opie said. "I ain't in shape to try to climb that rock but I can heist you up. I'll let you climb up on my shoulders and you throw it down."

Rip shook his head and licked his lips. Two more faraway shots sounded flatly.

"No," Rip said.

"Go on, get up here on my shoulders! Climb right offa your horse and onto mine, and then up on my shoulders. You can reach it from there."

Rip licked his lips.

"Opie," he said, "you and me could do some business together. I ain't as dumb as Massey thinks I am."

Opie still didn't understand, and neither did Massey, although he tensed rigidly. He couldn't believe what he knew was coming —but Doc could, all of a sudden.

Rip lost his nerve. He eased over on Opie's horse and the gaunt, tired beast stood quietly as Rip, leaning against the rock, stood up on Opie's shoulders. He didn't even try to inspect the top of the rock.

"Opie," he said, "it ain't here."

Opie yelled, "*What*—you mean it—you mean it's *gone?*"

Rip had the nerve of a cornered rat. Teetering there on Opie's shoulders he pulled his gun and smashed it down on Opie's head as he jumped. Opie reeled dizzily in the saddle but he held on. Rip jumped to his own horse and from it to the ground.

The posse was wasting ammunition, showing at least that it had powder to burn. Two more crackling shots, nearer, convinced Rip he didn't dare fire. He was a smallish man and Opie was a huge one, but he jumped at Opie and pounded away at Opie's head and neck with his gun, clinging with his left arm.

The horse moved ahead and Rip picked up his feet and swung from Opie's body and kept banging away with the gun. Slowly, like a giant tree toppling at the steady chipping of the ax, Opie slid out of the saddle and lay on his back, blood spattering and smearing his face.

Massey raised the gun and dropped down on his belly and took careful aim.

"The dirty little double-crossin' coward! I'll trust somebody like Opie ahead of a coward any day. Rip found the money up there and hid it himself! Rip's the only one that's knowed where it was for a long time," he whispered.

"Yes," Doc said, "and if you shoot, how do you think you're going to find it?"

Tears came to Massey's eyes but he lowered the gun. He said, "What good does it do to think of everything if you've gotta make up for the mistakes of a bunch of rum-dums?" He raised his voice: "Rip! Come here!"

He stood up. Rip saw him and went for his gun. Terror had the chinless fool out of his wits, or he never would have pulled on Massey under any circumstances, least of all with a posse converging on them.

It was his fool terror that made his shot good, for Massey stood there and took it, never dreaming Rip would fire. Rip's gun crashed twice, and one slug went into the ground and one went into Massey's side.

Massey tried to raise his gun but he didn't have Opie's physique. His face was full of horror as he realized how they had turned the circle. His wound was exactly where Opie's had been. He was a month and a half from flight, and they didn't have a month and a half to spend now.

Rip came closer, his vacuous face working, the gun still in his hand. Massey held his hand over his wound to stop the bubbling blood. Slowly he raised himself to his knees and beckoned with his left hand.

"Rip," he called, in a strange, breathless voice. "Rip, come here."

Rip saw it was an executioner calling. He backed away and his teeth began chattering.

"No! I know where the money is. I'll trade it off for time in the pen. I didn't kill nobody—they cain't hang me nohow—I'll take my chances! I taken all I intend to take off'n you-all."

"Rip, come here."

"No! You kicked me around all you're a-goin' to kick me around. Old Rip's havin' his day at last. Stay up here and rot for all I care!"

He ran toward his horse. The animal backed away. Rip slowed down and walked toward it slowly, holding his hand out. Massey raised the gun and fired. The concussion knocked him down, hurt his wound, made him moan, but it only scared the horse, it missed Rip by several feet.

It scared Rip, though. He threw away his gun and began running, on foot, straight down the mountain. He scrambled over rocks like a mountain goat.

In a minute, Massey opened his eyes.

"Doc," he said.

Doc had known somehow, what was going to happen when he saw Rip's unwillingness to get up there on Opie's

shoulders. He sat there and watched it happen. When Massey spoke to him, Doc said, "All right, Massey. We'll start all over again. This will hurt, but I've got to get you back to my medicines."

HE WAS A doctor again. He forgot everything else but his patient. He carried Massey back to the camp and laid him on Opie's bed. He was working over him when Opie, still stunned and covered with blood came staggering in afoot.

Opie sat down heavily. He was dazed to the point of helplessness, not merely from physical shock but from the stunning turn things had taken. He had been on guard against Massey right along, and against Doc since Gordon's death, but like Massey he had overlooked the brainless coward, Rip.

"Missed your vital organs but it was a .45 instead of a .44 and you're in bad shape," Doc said, after he had treated Massey's wound, after Massey was awake again.

Massey's eyes brightened with their old fire.

"Listen!" he said.

Guns were rattling somewhere, barely within earshot.

"Can't be anybody but Rip," Massey whispered, clenching his teeth in a hate-filled grin. "They opened up on him—didn't give him a chance. Or he lost his head and fought back. Now he can't lead them here."

He lay back panting. Opie opened his eyes and said, "Mebbe they won't find us, then." Massey gritted his teeth against the pain, smiling, and said, "We've got a chance. Opie, watch Doc. Don't let him give us away! Take him with you and bring your horse back. It's up to you now, Opie."

"Come on, Doc," Opie said.

They went down and brought back the horses.

Opie was badly cut up around the face and head, and barely able to stagger by the time they got back. Doc treated his wounds with iodine, and Massey, with a bullet hole in him, laughed at Opie's furious oaths.

"I wish I had a drink" Opie moaned.

"So do I," Massey whispered, "but wishin' is dry drinkin'."

"Why didn't you say you wanted a drink?"

They stared at Doc. He selected a brown bottle, opened it, sniffed at the cork. He shook his head and handed it over with a smile.

"Medicinal bourbon. You're not used to whiskey like this, you rotgut guzzlers! But it's the medicine you need now. Drink up!"

Opie grabbed at the bottle but Massey said, "After you, Doc. You're a sport after all."

Doc shook his head and let Opie have the bottle.

"I wanted to see whether I wanted the damn stuff or not. Turned out I didn't."

Opie hoisted the bottle and drank deeply. He lowered it with a sigh and handed it to Doc, who poured a stiff drink down Massey's throat.

"Tastes sweetish for my likin'," Opie said. "I like it to scald goin' down. But it puts heart in a man!"

"Mebbe this is what you saved for me, Doc," Massey said.

Doc said, "Could be, Massey. Now you better rest."

Massey lay back and closed his eyes.

Doc waited until Opie, too, began rubbing at his eyes. He got up and started walking away. Opie yelled after him and tried to get at his gun, but he stumbled and fell and lay there swearing in a thickish voice.

Massey, who had drunk less, turned over carefully and got his gun. But a big .45 hole and a little whiskey combined to whip him. He could get his hands on the gun but he couldn't make it perform.

"I'll be back, gentlemen," Doc said. "I never desert my patients. You'll be all right. There was tincture of opium—what is known as paregoric—along with whiskey in that bottle. I told you I was saving something for you, Massey. But I'll come back, and I'll pull you through like I pulled Opie through. *And I think you know why.*"

Massey did, but he could feel peaceful sleep stealing over him. He had figured ahead of Sarge and Gordon and Opie and

Rip, he had fought to the last, never quitting while half a chance remained. It wasn't Sarge or Gordon or Rip who did for him in the end. It was Doc, with those square brown bottles . . . .

Doc, carrying Opie's gun, went down until he spotted riders coming toward him. He fired the gun twice, as a signal. They didn't know him, and wouldn't believe it was the Doc Ochiltree they knew until they heard him speak.

He showed them where the money was because he knew where it had to be when he saw Rip run away. Rip wouldn't have left without the money if he had a chance to take it along. But he left without it, and that meant the money had to be hidden in the camp itself. There was only one place where it wouldn't be disturbed.

They lifted Massey carefully and carried him down the mountain with extreme gentleness, and it was not until his wound was almost healed that they told him he had been sleeping on eight thousand dollars. Rip had opened the sacks and spread the money out under the brush mattress . . . . Opie took it harder than Massey, even.

It was almost a week after his return to Jellico that Doc Ochiltree showed his face in the dining room of the Desert Anchor hotel. He let the word get around of its own accord. He stayed out of sight until he was pretty sure she was convinced.

"Steak," he said, "rare, with plenty of chopped raw onions, black coffee, blueberry pie."

Rose leaned one fist on the table and put her hand on her hip. There were tears in her eyes but anyone hearing her wouldn't have known it.

"Bud's girl," she said, "went home. We made up a purse."

"I know."

"I know you know. I hear you told 'em to send along the five hundred reward for Opie O'Brien to her. You're a fool." She called him a worse name; she was hard-mouthed and able to take care of herself and it was the first time she had ever felt tears.

"Nobody blames you, Doc. You didn't need to do that!"

"Steak, rare, with plenty of chopped raw onions—"

"Oh, you!"

But she went toward the kitchen, whistling. To the fat woman who ran the hotel she said, "I think I'll quit this lousy job if my stray dog says the right words tonight."

He did.

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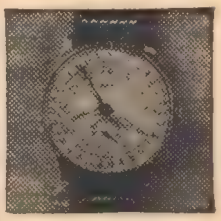

3 YEARS GUARANTEE

Tom Horn—Lawman and Renegade

By BEN CAPPS

Was he bushwack killer or peerless lawdog? The vilest badman to ever fork leather or a respectable Sir Galahad of the Old West? People continue to disagree, but even those who hated him most endowed him with one admirable characteristic—nerve.

HE WAS a one-man vigilante committee, a fearless Sir Galahad of the West, an honest and respectable gentleman. He did part of his work outside the law because he had to; yet he did more to clean out cattle thieves and bring law and order than any other one man.

He was a dirty, low-down dry-gulcher, a murderer, a man who killed for money. He took the side of the big cattle baron against the poor settler and small rancher. He was no better than the vilest badman that ever forked leather.

Curiously, these two opposite opinions are both descriptions of the same man—Tom Horn. Opinions about Horn were always violent. He was either hated or loved, the viewpoint depending on which side you were on in the great wars of the last half of the 1800s.

The cattle kings had come first to the

West. Now they were trying to drive out the small ranchers, the sheepmen, and the sod-busters, whose 160-acre claims cut up the vast grazing lands. Tom Horn hired out his guns to the big cattlemen.

Few men were a match for Horn physically. Standing six feet two, with broad shoulders and deep chest, he had the strength of a young bull and the stamina of a long-legged horse. He stood straight as an Indian and walked with the swagger of a soldier-of-fortune. Piercing dark eyes blazed out of his lean, hard-featured face.

It can hardly be denied that he killed from ambush. Yet there is also proof that he was not afraid to face death. Some say that, since he learned fighting from the Apaches, he was not to blame if his fighting code resembled theirs.

Horn didn't dress like a cowpuncher just to make an impression. At a rodeo in Phoenix, Arizona, he roped and tied a steer in 49½ seconds to set a world's record. This is far from the present record, but under the conditions and rules of those days it was an awe-inspiring feat. Buffalo Bill offered Horn a handsome salary to join his Wild West Show about this time. Horn refused.

The great Apache wars had taught Horn how to fight. He had lived with the Indians for a time and learned their language. He served as chief scout for the United States Army and rode against Geronimo, the wily Apache chief. As an interpreter he was invaluable in some of the peace councils with Geronimo, and with his knowledge of Indian fighting he helped the soldiers beat the Indians at their own game.

Horn's life had been a series of grand adventures, as a soldier, a lawman, and a detective. His record commanded the admiration of everyone—until he hired out his guns to the big cattlemen. From that day on he was hated as much as he was respected.

The great range wars were not clear-cut issues. Both sides were partly in the right. The small landowners claimed they lost stock in the big outfits' round-ups and that the big ranchers tried to keep them from settling on land to which they had a legal right.

The big cattlemen said the nesters were ruining the range and rustling their stock. Actually, small-time rustling was not considered wrong by many people. The branding of mavericks was an excepted practice. Around the huge ranch of one cattle baron, a man named Haley, the nester's usual grace before meals was, "Thank God for the bread, and Haley for the meat."

DURING his early years as detective for the cattlemen, Tom Horn brought in two rustlers, the Laughoff brothers, along with the cattle they had stolen. Horn had camped on their trail for weeks and gathered what he considered indisputable evidence. He felt sure the men would be sent up for stiff sentences. But they went on trial, and the jury, made up of nesters, found them "Not guilty!"

Horn was extremely bitter as he talked it over with his boss. After all the trouble and expense the men had gone free. "I know a way of dealing with rustlers," Horn said. "From now on I'm going to save you all the lawyers, and witnesses' fees I can!" His boss told him to go ahead. From that day on Tom Horn was his own law—judge, jury, and executioner.

His first victims were Powell and Lewis, homesteaders on Horse Creek, east of Cheyenne, who had bad reputations as cattle rustlers. Neither of them tried to keep it a secret that he stole cattle. One of Powell's favorite jibes was, "Come and see me sometime and I'll feed you your own beef!"

Tom Horn was offered $300 to get Powell. He accepted the offer and didn't hesitate at all in carrying out his side of the bargain. He rode up to the Powell place in broad daylight. The homesteader was working in the alfalfa field. Horn rode down through the alfalfa and drew rein in front of Powell as though to pass the time of day; then without a word he whipped out his gun and shot the homesteader dead in his tracks!

Tom Horn dismounted and placed a rock under the head of the corpse. This rock under the head of a victim was his own private brand, a notice to his employer that he had done his job, and a warning to other cattle thieves.

Lewis still remained as a thorn in the side of the big ranchers. Some thought he would high-tail it after the Powell killing, but he didn't. "That dry-gulcher better stay away from me!" he said. "I'm not scared of any hired killer!"

Tom Horn took the job for the same $300. He rode out and found the homesteader alone in his horse corral. Horn drew his six-shooter and sent five slugs crashing into Lewis before the man had time to put up any kind of defense. Laughing about it later, Horn said, "He changed his mind about being scared when I opened up. He was the worst scared so-and-so you ever saw!"

After this killing Horn put a rock under the head of the dead man and then added another fine touch to confuse the law. He burnt powder in five 45-90 shells to make them smell fresh and scattered them nearby. It later became a favorite trick of his to kill his man with a six-gun and plant rifle shells around, but in this case he found reason to curse about the matter. "After all the trouble I went to leaving those low-down law officers a clue," he muttered, "and they didn't even find the shells!"

No very great effort was made to catch Horn for these killings; although it was well known that he did them. Many lawmen were pleased.

Horn bragged wildly about the killings. He killed more men and also bragged about them. He claimed credit for violent deaths in which he had no part, and even swore he had killed men who later turned up alive and healthy! Many saloon crowds were entertained by his lurid stories of rustler's deaths.

But this braggadocio was not useless vanity, for whatever else Tom Horn was, he was intelligent. He had two reasons for bragging. He wanted to convince lawmen that he was a harmless blow-hard, and he wanted to inspire a dread fear of quick death in all men who thought rustling a few cattle was a trifling matter.

Convincing lawmen that he was harmless, Horn found a difficult task. His past record as a fighting man gave him away. Still, no one knew just how much of his bragging to believe, since some of it was obviously false. He was more successful in arousing fear among rustlers. He rode far and wide over the range, and the stories about him went even further than he rode. He became a living legend. Many tough longriders stood in absolute awe of his name. Wherever a man under suspicion of rustling met a violent death, Horn got the credit.

Small-time cow thieves as well as professional rustlers came to fear this mysterious stock detective who took the law into his own hands. A settler driving along in the moonlight with a stolen calf in his wagon would cringe with terror on seeing a lone rider gallop over the crest of the horizon. For that lone rider might be Tom Horn!

AMONG the worst centers of rustling activity at that time was Brown's Hole, wild and desolate region where Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming meet. Bear River runs into Green River here, in a canyon 2,000 feet below the surrounding plains. The terrain is rough; side gorges and box canyons criss-cross the area. For decades a sorry assortment of the backwash of civilization had made the Hole their hideout and had preyed on cattlemen in three states.

Into this wild country rode a tall, dark cowboy who called himself Tom Hicks. Inhabitants of the Hole found him to be a friendly fellow and a good hand with cattle. They would have changed their minds had they known his real name; for he was the one man they had reason to fear above all others—Tom Horn. The big cattle interests had given him orders: "Clean out Brown's Hole!"

Horn lived among the people of the Hole several months to get the lay of the land. His plan was to ferret out one or two of the most troublesome rustlers and make examples of them. He attended dances and any other gatherings where loose tongues might reveal information to help him pick out his victims. People found it easy to like Horn. They talked. Slowly he gathered evidence and singled out two men, Matt Rash and Isam Dart.

Horn was so successful in making friends with Rash that the rustler finally

asked Horn to come and live with him. Horn accepted. Out riding on the range one day the two men ran into the other man Horn had marked, Isam Dart.

Dart told them to turn back and go the other way but they refused. Riding on a little further they discovered his reason for wanting them to turn back. Dart had just killed a neighboring rancher's prize bull. Rash kidded Dart about doing such a foolish thing and told him he would keep quiet if Dart would give him his favorite sorrel horse. Dart said no, but the following night Rash slipped into Dart's horse corral and stole the sorrel.

What had started out as a joke became a serious argument. All over Brown's Hole people knew that Isam Dart and Matt Rash had fallen out over a sorrel horse. This suited Horn fine. He didn't know how much attention the law would pay to a killing here, but if any real attempt was made to catch a killer, Horn wanted the finger of suspicion to point elsewhere.

Matt Rash rose early one morning and swung open the door of his cabin. A piece of paper was nailed to the door. It read: *Matt Rash, your rustling days are over. Leave the country in sixty days or you will die! Signed, "T. Horn."*

Rash got a good laugh out of it. Horn was still living with him. "Look at this, Hicks," Rash guffawed. "Pretty good joke, huh?"

"How do you know it's not the real thing?" Horn asked.

"Because I know that Tom Horn wouldn't come to Brown's Hole," Rash said. "Horn's got more sense than to come around here."

"Maybe he has," Horn agreed. But he acted as if he didn't think it was a joke and as if he were afraid to live with Rash any longer. The next day he left Rash's house and went to stay with other friends in the Hole for a few days. Then he announced that he was heading for Baggs, Wyoming, to look for a job.

Instead, he rode back to Matt Rash's place. Rash was in for a big surprise!

Horn rode up to the rustler's cabin quietly. He kicked open the door of the little cabin with gun leveled and ready.

Rash was eating dinner. He rose up, startled, and fell immediately with the deafening roar of Horn's six-gun!

A crashing noise sounded outside the cabin. Horn whirled. It was only Rash's horse breaking loose. When he turned again to the interior of the cabin, Rash was struggling convulsively to gain his feet. Horn stepped nearer and shot him through the head!

Then calmly disregarding the dead man, he sat down and finished eating the meal Rash had started! When finished, Horn went outside and hunted up Dart's sorrel horse which he also shot. If a lawman investigated, it would look like a clear case against Dart. Then Horn headed out for Baggs. He had to ride fast to make his story hold up.

In Baggs, the big stock detective got into a fight which nearly cost him his life. After killing one of the worst rustlers in Brown's Hole, he got into a saloon brawl with a complete stranger.

He had come in tired from his long ride and headed straight for the Four-Ace Beer Hall, where he planked down a silver dollar and tossed off two glasses of raw whiskey in rapid succession. Another man at the bar, Newt Kelly, who was known as a bad hombre, noticed the stranger and decided to test his mettle. "Men where I come from would be kangarooed for taking a drink alone," Kelly sneered.

Horn had never taken such talk from any man, and tired as he was, he couldn't take it now. "If you think you can kangaroo me, you're welcome to try!"

NEWT KELLY said he would fight him with a knife. Both men took off their shirts and stuck the end of a bandanna handkerchief in their teeth. The barkeeper loaned Horn a knife and whispered in his ear, "If I yell 'Here comes Bud Wilkins,' look around, or you may get shot in the back!"

Someone gave the signal "Go!" and the fight began.

Kelly swung hard with his left fist to the stomach to double Horn up and give him a knife opening. Instead, Horn came in close and took the slash on his shoulder

in place of the throat. Blood sprayed out in a tiny stream from a small artery. This fellow Kelly was good with a knife!

Then each of the fighters gripped the other's knife hand. They strained back and forth like two bulls with horns locked together. Kelly gave way first. Still controlling the other's knife hand, Horn could have ended the fight with a stabbing blow. Instead, he only slashed him up and down the back a few times.

About that time the barkeeper shouted, "Here comes Bud Wilkins!"

Horn swung his opponent around like a dancing partner and saw a friend of Kelly's with a six-gun levelled! Horn kept Kelly between himself and the gun while onlookers made Wilkins put the weapon away.

In the meantime Kelly, who had lost a lot of blood from the gashes in his back, folded like a jackknife. Horn's wound was bandaged by the saloon keeper. Then the big stock detective got on his horse and galloped the sixty miles to Rawlins!

Another version of this knife fight, told by a man who hated big cattlemen and their stock detectives, shows up Horn as an overbearing bully and a coward. One of the stories is right or both are partly right, for Horn carried the scar of a deep wound in his shoulder to his death.

Horn's plan for throwing suspicion of the Rash killing on Isam Dart had worked well. It had kept suspicion from "Tom Hicks," but it had also failed to scare any rustlers. The law didn't bother much with solving the killing, and the other inhabitants of the Hole laid the blame on Dart. Horn saw that he must go back and get Isam Dart.

Dart was helping in the round-up of Rash's cattle. He, together with several other cowboys, was camped in a cabin on the range. A whistling blue norther had just blown up. They could scarcely keep warm even by the big fire in the cabin, and they dreaded starting out that morning to work cattle.

As they opened the door and stepped out to get their horses, a faint crack floated up from the corral against the wind. Invisible lead tore into Isam Dart's chest and slammed him back against the ground! His companions fled back into the cabin. Dart was dead.

The shot was from 500 feet, an almost miraculous shot considering the violence of the blizzard and the inaccurate rifle sights of those days.

Horn made sure that he got credit for this one. He didn't hide his trail. He let people know that Tom Hicks was none other than Tom Horn. On the ride out of Brown's Hole, he made fast time till his horse was winded; then rode boldly up to a ranch corral and traded his horse for a fresh one and rode off.

The plan for scaring the rustlers in Brown's Hole worked this time. Several men who had rustled cattle in their day packed up and left suddenly. And here, even in this desolate and lawless region, men began to ride past unbranded calves without the slightest desire to unlimber their ropes and branding irons.

Horn had never been troubled much by the law. Throughout his life, he had shown disdain for all lawmen. But law did come to the West, slowly but surely. And its coming sealed the doom of all men like Horn who believed in six-gun justice. Near Iron Mountain, Wyoming, the old feud between big cattle interests and nesters smouldered slowly with more smoke than flame. Then Kels Nickell, a nester, brought a big herd of sheep into the country. The feud burst suddenly into red-hot flame! Willie Nickell, 13-year-old son of Kels, was shot dead from ambush!

All over the country people rose in anger at this wanton child murder. Suspicion pointed at Tom Horn. "Tom Horn has done this," people muttered indignantly. "This time he went too far!"

Joe Lefors, U. S. Marshal in Cheyenne, investigated the case. Convinced of Horn's guilt, he plotted to trick a confession out of him. He got deputy sheriff Leslie Snow and the district court stenographer to help him.

Snow had an old grudge against Horn. He owned a giant wolfhound, thirty-two inches tall at the shoulders, which he loved and cared for almost like a child. Once in fun Horn had roped and tied the hound for the entertainment of the guests at the Cheyenne Club. Snow considered it an

insult, but had hesitated to do anything about it. Now he was glad to help Lefors.

The marshal found Horn staggering drunk in a Cheyenne saloon. With suggestions of a deal to clean up some rustlers in Montana, Lefors persuaded him to come to his office for a talk. Lefors' two helpers hid behind a door and took down every word that was uttered. The marshal steered the conversation around to the Willie Nickell murder. Horn talked plenty! He said he had been after Kels and the kid had discovered him; then he had to kill the kid to keep him from giving warning.

HORN said later that it had only been the whiskey in him talking, but true or false, the confession stood up in court. Horn was arrested in the Inter-Ocean Hotel without any trouble. Then followed a 13-day trial in which the entire country took sides, a trial, not of one man only, but of the whole cattle-baron system in which the life of a sheepherder's son had been without value. Horn was confident, but on that day when the jury filed in with their verdict, the jury foreman uttered, not two words, but one: "Guilty!"

Horn did not lose hope. He had powerful friends on the outside. They would fight his case to the Supreme Court if they had to. Meanwhile other friends helped him plot a jail break. These friends hired Hubert Herr, a local youngster, to contact Horn. Herr stole a saddle and got himself sentenced to the Cheyenne jail for thirty days, where he could talk to the doomed man each day.

Horn himself planned the details of the break. The jail was to be blown up with dynamite. A gun and plenty of ammunition, an unbranded saddle horse, and provisions for a long ride were to be provided. Horn wrote these directions on toilet paper and gave them to Herr.

But shortly before Herr's thirty days were up, another kid was put in the same cell. The new kid was pretty green and took his jail sentence hard. During the night, he began to cry. Horn cursed the youngster for disturbing his sleep. "Somebody shut up that blubbering baby!" he yelled. Horn's attitude set Herr to thinking. Maybe Horn wasn't an innocent man fighting for his life as he had been described. Herr thought about another kid—Willie Nickell.

When Hubert Herr walked out of the jail, he had made up his mind. Instead of going to Horn's friends, he turned the toilet paper over to a newspaper man and fled the country.

The attempt to appeal Horn's case to the Supreme Court failed. Last minute pleas to the governor for a stay of execution were just as futile. The doomed man must have given up hope in those last days, but no one would have known it to look at him. He showed the same interest in the preparations for the hanging as everyone else did.

Death was no stranger to Horn, and he thought of his own with the same indifference that he had always shown before. Standing on the platform of the scaffold he helped his executioners fix the straps around his arms and legs. He kidded with the witnesses. "What's the matter, Joe?" he asked a young deputy hangman. "Ain't losing your nerve, are you?" As the hood came over Horn's face, a strange, unmirthful smile played about his lips.

The trap was sprung, and witnesses watched the wildly struggling body twenty-one minutes before the doctor pronounced him dead.

So ended Tom Horn. His death was another of the contradictions of opinion about his life. He had been a chief scout for the Army, had been a United States marshal, had been cited for gallantry in the Spanish-American War, and had served as a Pinkerton man and a stock detective. Now he was hung for the cowardly murder of a 13-year-old boy. Perhaps people will never agree about him. The argument is as broad as the old cattleman-nester range wars. But even those who hated him granted him one admirable characteristic—nerve. And no one can deny that his story is a unique and fascinating part of the true legends of the old West.

POT-LUCK

By ROBT. L. TRIMNELL

You can trade lead for gold in holding up a stagecoach but you'll get a different pot of beans when you stop Old Sam Taney's freight wagon.

OLD SAM TANEY had just left the Ace King Saloon when he ran into the agent of the Gray Gulch Stage Line. He jerked to a stop in front of the little man with a clatter of bootheels. Sam scrubbed a bandana across his leathery forehead to clear the sweat. His mustaches fairly bristled as he shouted at the agent.

"Joe Barnes, I told you once and I'm tellin' yuh fer the last time. I'm finished drivin' yer stage. From now on I'm givin' my old bones a rest on that nice low seat of th' Harris Company's freight wagon."

Joe Barnes started back under the outburst. Rubbing a hand on his neat blue suit he tried soft words on the old driver. "Now look here, Sam. The Gray Line has paid you well for years. We will continue to do so. It seems hardly fair that you should leave us now, with all the difficulties we have been having in running up to the gold mines and back."

"You been havin' difficulties! With Black Crant and his bandits flingin' lead at me durned near every time I make the run! Shore, Harris Comp'ny can't pay me much as you can, but ding dang it, Black Crant don't h'ist no freight wagons. He don't care for beans and miners' clothes. Crant just trades lead fer gold. By dad, I aim ter have a whole hide so's I can spend what money I earn!"

Old Sam dodged past the stage agent and clattered down the boardwalk. His lean and bony but still strong shoulders bobbed from side to side as he pounded along, and the big Colt at his hip bounced jerkily. The agent stared after him, shaking his head and cussing mildly at the oldster's stubbornness.

Sam Taney stopped in front of the

Harris Company storehouse and yelled in, "Hey, got this here wagon ready to tear up the gulch?"

The wagon was next to the boardwalk, a huge, sturdy one with an eight foot high load of food, clothing, miners' equipment and ammunition. Four big bay horses waited patiently in the harness.

A tow headed boy came running out of the warehouse. "She's all set, Mr. Taney. The boss says don't fergit the special bag of beans yer to deliver."

Nodding, the oldster climbed over a wheel and swung into the driver's seat. The broad backs of the four bays were in front of him. "No blasted speed in them critters," he muttered. Then he turned to the boy, scanned him from head to foot with piercing blue eyes.

"I never carry cash over the trail, with Black Crant runnin' loose," he said. He slipped a gold piece out of his pocket and threw it to the boy. "Spend it on somethin' useful, younker," he growled. With a snort Sam turned and grabbed up the reins and slapped them over the bays' broad backs. As the wagon ground into the sandy street, creaking and groaning, Old Sam remembered that the goldpiece was his last pocket money. Oh well, up at the mines they'd give him chow and a drink on the cuff. Besides, the money would be better spent by the boy than if he were held up and robbed on the way. Then he remembered that he wouldn't be held up. Nobody'd be much interested in stealing a load of beans and clothes and miners' stuff.

As the heavily loaded wagon got under way he saw Joe Barnes on the boardwalk. The stage agent called out, "Bet you wish you had a nice fast team of skittery mules."

"Get a younker that's light on brains to drive yer blasted crate!" the oldster yelled back.

Barnes grinned. "Bet you a drink that when you come back you'll be looking for a rig that gives some speed."

"I'll take that bet!" Sam shouted. "Raise it to a bottle!"

Joe Barnes grinned after the retreating figure of the oldster. Sam was likely to come back admitting defeat and buy the bottle. Then he'd set out again on a slow freight wagon, just for orneryness. It was his idea of a joke. But it wouldn't last long, Joe figured. Sam Taney was too much a hell-for-leather stageman to stick with the plodding draft horses long.

And three hours later, Joe would have enjoyed seeing the face of the old driver. Reins hanging loose in his hands, he growled at the stupid slowness of his team. He slouched down in the seat, eyeing the gently heaving backs of the bays. On Injun Flat, too! He looked out at the broad expanse of sagebrush, shimmering in the midday heat, and remembered how he'd given the four mule team their head through this run. Move? Brother, did those longears move! They'd clatter across the Flats with Sam holding four sets of lines, easing out or hauling in like a true artist of the leather, perched on the edge of the seat and yelling as the sage-brush flashed by.

AGAIN he eyed the great, slowly moving muscles in the bays' rumps. It was almost more than a man could stand. But at least he didn't have to worry about trading gun-slugs with Black Crant and his gang. A man could live to a ripe old age on this run. Trouble was, it was like when he asked Doc Dukes if he'd live to be a hundred if he laid off liquor and smokes. Doc Dukes said no. But it would seem like a hundred. Angrily, Sam rolled himself a smoke and slouched down in the seat.

The wagon crawled slowly up to Devil's Pass. Black Crant's favorite bushwhack spot, Sam thought. Big boulders crowding into the road, big gray cusses that Crant's badhats hid their horses behind and climbed all over until they had the stagecoach covered every inch by the line of rifle fire. This was where the switch from stage to freight would pay off in ease of mind and wholeness of hide, Sam thought. He grinned tauntingly up at the rocks. Go on, rocks, hide as many bushwackers as you want! They ain't goin' to bother me!

Sam was still grinning when he pushed through between the closest rocks. The road turned there, and suddenly he hauled

the team up short. Three rocks in the middle of the trail! Black Crant's old trick to stop the fastest moving stage drivers.

"Jist sit tight and do what I say," came a voice from up on the rocks. Sam Taney peered up. A rifle muzzle was looking down his throat. One hard eye squinted over the sights.

For a minute Sam thought, well, they can't do anything but let me go. I haven't even got a dollar in my pocket. Then he saw another stumpy rifle barrel nose over a rock ledge and another hard face behind it. Slowly his hands climbed to a respectable distance from six-gun.

"Just drop your shootin' iron on the ground," said the voice from the rocks. It was the hoarse voice of Black Crant. Sam obeyed. There were four or five men that traveled with Crant. No use fighting it out with a bunch of well-hidden hombres like that. Besides, they'd let him go when they saw there was no gold or other valuables in the freight.

Burly Black Crant stepped around from behind a rock. He holstered six-gun as he came with long pounding strides. Long black hair hung down over his ears, and his face was mostly hid behind a curly black beard. To Sam, he could probably be called "Black" for other reasons, too, considering how greasy his clothes looked.

"Harry!" he bellowed. "You stay up on the rock and keep lookout case somebody comes shovin' their nose in. Rest of yuh come down and start pickin' out supplies. And you, you old coot," he said to Sam, "get down off that wagon seat before we blow yuh offen it."

Grumbling, Sam climbed down. He was a bit sore from hours on the wagon seat, stretched himself as he walked over to a rock and leaned against it.

A tiny, spidery looking man was the first to shinny down from the rocks. He looked at Sam with a glance that darted nervously around. A sort of recognition showed in his eyes, then he forgot it and leaped up on the wagon.

"Say, what's this in the wet bag?" he said in a squeaky voice.

"Beans," said Sam.

He tore the burlap bag open and dipped his hands in. "Look, Black, we got beans again! And all soaked up so's we can cook 'em right away."

"Them's special beans," Sam said. "Harris sent 'em special to—"

"Shut up!" roared Black. "If Spider wants them beans you shut up!"

In the next few minutes Black Crant and three of his men tore through the freight wagon, throwing the stuff on the ground that they wanted. Shirts and levis, boots, ammunition, canned food, smoked hams, and beans. It was evident that they were stocking their hideout. Sam figured that at worst they'd take a hundred dollars worth of stuff. Harris Company could afford that.

"You, old man!" Black roared.

Sam turned a weatherbeaten face toward the bandit and scowled.

"You look like a particular stage driver we've had plenty trouble with."

Spider piped up, "Shore, boss. That's the critter. He drove Gray Gulch Stage."

"Why yuh drivin' this freighter?" said Black.

Sam was about to explain when his anger got the better of him. "So's I could spit in yer black face, you thievin' murderin' son!"

Black moved hurriedly away as Sam puckered his lips to spit. His black brows knotted. "I think there's a trick in this. Wouldn't be that your gonna bring gold back hid in that wagon, would it?"

"Yeah, that's it," said Sam. "Whole wagon load of it, nice slow wagon so's you can rob it nice and easy like."

BLACK CRANT marched up in front of the oldster, crowded in. Suddenly a ham-like fist rocketed up from below and smashed into his jaw. Sam saw spinning lights and felt his jaw swell. Then it cleared and the black bearded face was in front of him again.

"Come on, boys," Crant yelled. "Pile the stuff on them pack hosses. And get a hoss for this old coot. We're goin' to take him back to camp and get us some information out of him." Then his fist rose once more. Sam glimpsed it coming and tried to jump back. But solid rock backed him, and he only bumped

his head and the fist crashed into his jaw. Then there was nothing but blackness.

The sun was much lower when Sam managed to open his eyes. His head throbbed from jaw to skull. A chaffing all over his chest and stomach and a yanking at his waist told him he was laying across a saddle, belt tied to the horn. For some reason his hands were not tied. Perhaps Black Crant didn't worry much about an old man when he had four fast gunmen handy.

The sharp rock masses and tangled mesquite growth showed that they were in the Wildcat Canyon country. Every time a posse got after the Crant gang they disappeared in this wilderness. At last an outsider would see their hangout. But Sam Taney figured it would be the last thing he would see.

"Lay down there, you old coot!" shouted Black as Sam tried to struggle into a sitting position. He slumped back and reconciled himself to the jolting that pounded his bruised skull and jaw. It took a heap of self control to do it, but he decided there would be a better time to make a stand against the thieves.

At last they came to the hideout, a rickety log lean-to at the mouth of a shallow cave. The approach was a winding trail through the mesquite, perfectly hidden unless the rider were familiar with every bush in Wildcat Canyon. While the others dismounted Sam managed to slip off the rope that held him to the saddlehorn, and he climbed painfully to the ground.

"Spider, let's get to work on this old cuss," Black said.

Spider groaned. "Aw, Black, us boys are hungry as mountain wolves in a blizzard. Let's throw these here beans in the kettle. They're all soaked up and ready."

Sam tensed himself as he waited for the answer. Way he figured it, his life hung on Black's answer.

"Well, go ahead," Black told them. "No hurry about him. But after yuh eat, we're goin' to string this hombre up to the nearest tree until we find what he's been doin' drivin' that wagon. Go on, eat yerselves sick."

The stage bandits scurried around, Spider starting up the embers of the morning's fire, another bringing a big caldron of water. They tore open the burlap bag and dumped the already soaked beans in. Building the fire up to an angry blaze, they sat back and waited. "Always did hanker for beans," Spider said in his squeaky voice. Then he settled down, back to a rock and with his six-gun trained on Sam.

The others drifted off to sleep while the beans were cooking. Sam sat quietly, trying to keep from shooting off his mouth at the renegades. Joe Barnes had always said he talked too much. He decided he had better not talk until the right time came. He hoped that perhaps all but one would sleep. That might give him a chance. But no, Spider and Black remained awake, keeping a good distance apart and both with guns ready. He might rush one of them, but not both. That left only a slim chance. And that one was hardly worth pinning all his hopes on.

It was two hours later when Spider, by testing the beans between his fingers, pronounced them ready. "Wake up, you lazy critters," he said. "Beans ready."

The three sleepers climbed to their feet and hunted around the dirty campsite for mess tins. Sleepily they held them out while Spider ladled out savory brown beans. "Want some beans, old man?" Spider said. "Might be the last grub you get for a long time." There was an evil look in his green eyes as he said that.

Old Sam Taney bristled. "I don't cotton to no stolen grub," he said. "Give my share to your boss here."

"I don't like 'em," growled Black. "Throw me that ham you got, Spider. I'll cut a slab offen that."

Sam watched the bean eaters narrowly. His hand slipped close to a jagged rock about the size of his fist. One big as his head lay in front of him. They were his only possible weapons.

"Funny taste to these beans," Spider said. "Good though." The others nodded in agreement. Sam figured they'd all been cowhands at one time. Cattle ranch cooks had a way of making you either like beans or starve to death. His mouth watered a bit as he saw them wolfing down the

grub. It was a long time since he'd eaten. He sucked in his stomach and decided he could wait.

THEN it happened. A hard faced crook set down his half-empty plate of beans and got to his feet. "Don't reckon I'll want much more," he said. "Maybe I'll take me a little walk out to the bushes." Suddenly he doubled up, groaning and sprawled on the ground. Another didn't even manage to get up. He just crouched over and fell on his face. Spider stared dumbfounded at him. Then Sam saw his face turn green and he began gasping. "I'm pizzened!" he yelped, and clung to a rock for support. In a minute he was draped over the rock like a dirty blanket.

"Must of been somethin' wrong with them beans," Sam said. He watched the remaining bean-eater anxiously. He was the huskiest of the lot. Probably take more to get him.

The bean-eater turned to Sam. "You pizzened us, you old—" His beefy hand slid down to coltbutt. But as he started yanking it out, spasms reached up from his stomach and shook him like a terrier shakes a rat. When it was through he was writhing on the ground.

Black jumped to his feet, ran over to the big, bubbling pot of beans. "What in tarnation is in that pot?" he shouted.

That gave Sam his chance. Leaning forward a little, he hefted the big rock in front of him, heaved it high and accurately as possible. It made a neat arc, just missed Black's head, and landed "Plunk!" in the pot of boiling beans.

The brown fluid rose as though exploded, slammed boiling beans all over Black Crant. At the same moment Sam leaped to his feet, another rock in his hand, and threw himself at the gang leader. "I'm scalded!" yelled Black. Through the bean juice that streamed down over his eyes he saw the oldster plunging at him. Crant swung a big Colt toward the flying figure. Then a jagged rock crashed into his hand and he let the gun go with a yell.

Sam dropped the rock and concentrated everything on his right fist. He slammed it into the gunman's big jaw. Then he balanced on his right foot and brought a left around into Black's middle. It sank almost to his wrist.

With a groan Black Crant went down and out.

Sam stood over the prostrate outlaw for a minute, recovering his breath. Then he got a twenty-five foot lariat from one of the saddles and hacked it into five pieces with Spider's butcher knife. In a few minutes he had the four sick outlaws and their leader trussed up like Christmas turkeys. As he tightened the last knot on Black Crant's wrists, the gunman groaned and tried to sit up. Sam pushed Black's own .45 into the middle of the bean-splattered beard.

"What—happened?" said Crant.

Sam chuckled. "Why, I just mopped up the sagebrush with yuh a little, yuh low-down skunk. I didn't figger I'd have much fun this trip, pushin' them fat bays over the trail. Should've figured you'd be so greedy yuh'd even attack a grub wagon." Sam scratched his head where whispy hair stuck through under the hat. He wished the stage were up at Devil's Pass instead of the freight wagon. He could load the longloopers on and have them to the deputy sheriff at the mines in no time at all.

That was when he realized how much he missed the stage. Blast it, there was that bottle of whiskey Joe Barnes would win if he quit freighting. But it would be worth it.

"What pizzened my boys?" Crant said.

The oldster laughed and looked down at the groaning outlaws. "Why, them 'special' beans. 'Course, your boys'll be all right in a couple hours. Y'see, Old Man Harris mixed up some special solution to keep roaches and other varmints from eatin' the beans. He told me to have the mine cook try 'em on a coyote or other critter first. He was afraid they might of soaked too long in the stuff. 'Pears they did soak too long. Have to warn the mine cook about 'em."

ALL GOLD CANYON

By JACK LONDON

The lone prospector abruptly halted his work. His hands held a chunk of gold. It seemed that between him and life had passed something dark and smothering and menacing; a gloom, as it were, that swallowed up life and made for death—his death.

IT WAS the green heart of the canyon, where the walls swerved back from the rigid plan and relieved their harshness of line by making a little sheltered nook and filling it to the brim with sweetness and roundness and softness. Here all things rested. Even the narrow stream ceased its turbulent downrush long enough to form a quiet pool. Knee-deep in the water, with drooping head and half-shut eyes, drowsed a red-coated, many-antlered buck.

On one side, beginning at the very lip of the pool, was a tiny meadow, a cool, resilient surface of green that extended to the base of the frowning wall. Beyond the pool a gentle slope of earth ran up and up to meet the opposing wall. Fine grass covered the slope—grass that was spangled with flowers, with here and there patches of color, orange and purple and golden. Below, the canyon was shut in. There was no view. The walls leaned together abruptly and the canyon ended in a chaos of rocks, moss-covered and hidden by a green screen of vines and creepers and boughs of trees. Up the canyon rose far hills and peaks, the big foothills, pine-covered and remote. And far beyond, like clouds upon the border of the sky, towered minarets of white, where the Sierra's eternal snows flashed austerely the blazes of the sun.

There was no dust in the canyon. The leaves and flowers were clean and virginal. The grass was young velvet. Over the pool three cottonwoods sent their snowy fluffs fluttering down the quiet air. On the slope the blossoms of the wine-wooded manzanita filled the air with springtime odors, while the leaves, wise with experience, were already beginning their vertical twist against the coming aridity of summer. In the open spaces on the slope, beyond the farthest shadow-reach of the manzanita, poised the mariposa lilies, like so many flights of jeweled moths suddenly arrested and on the verge of trembling into flight again. Here and there that woods harlequin, the madroña, permitting itself to be caught in the act of changing its pea-green trunk to madder red, breathed its fragrance into the air from great clusters of waxen bells. Creamy white were these bells, shaped like lilies of the valley, with the sweetness of perfume that is of the springtime.

There was not a sigh of wind. The air was drowsy with its weight of perfume. It was a sweetness that would have been cloying had the air been heavy and humid. But the air was sharp and thin. It was as starlight transmuted into atmosphere, shot through and warmed by sunshine, and flower-drenched with sweetness.

An occasional butterfly drifted in and out through the patches of light and shade. And from all about rose the low and sleepy hum of mountain bees—feasting sybarites that jostled one another good-naturedly at the board, nor found time for rough discourtesy. So quietly did the little stream drip and ripple its way through the canyon that it spoke only in faint and occasional gurgles. The voice of the stream was as a drowsy whisper, ever interrupted by dozings and silences, ever lifted again in the awakenings.

The motion of all things was a drifting in the heart of the canyon. Sunshine and butterflies drifted in and out among the trees. The hum of the bees and the whisper of the stream were a drifting of sound. And the drifting sound and drifting color seemed to weave together in the making of a delicate and intangible fabric which was the spirit of the place. It was a spirit of peace that was not of death,

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"Aha! Mr. Pocket! I'm a-comin', an' I'm shorely gwine to get yer! You heah me, Mr. Pocket?"

but of smooth-pulsing life, of quietude that was not silence, of movement that was not action, of repose that was quick with existence without being violent with struggle and travail. The spirit of the place was the spirit of the peace of the living, somnolent with the easement and content of prosperity, and undisturbed by rumors of far wars.

The red-coated, many-antlered buck acknowledged the lordship of the spirit of the place and dozed knee-deep in the cool, shaded pool. There seemed no flies to vex him and he was languid with rest. Sometimes his ears moved when the stream awoke and whispered; but they moved lazily, with foreknowledge that it was merely the stream grown garrulous at discovery that it had slept.

But there came a time when the buck's ears lifted and tensed with swift eagerness for sound. His head was turned down the canyon. His sensitive, quivering nostrils scented the air. His eyes could not pierce the green screen through which the stream rippled away, but to his ears came the voice of a man. It was a steady, monotonous, singsong voice. Once the buck heard the harsh clash of metal upon rock. At the sound he snorted with a sudden start that jerked him through the air from water to meadow, and his feet sank into the young velvet, while he pricked his ears and again scented the air. Then he stole across the tiny meadow, pausing once and again to listen, and faded away out of the canyon like a wraith, soft-footed and without sound.

The clash of steel-shod soles against the rocks began to be heard, and the man's voice grew louder. It was raised in a sort of chant and became distinct with nearness, so that the words could be heard:

"Tu'n aroun' an' tu'n yo' face
Untoe them sweet hills of grace.
(D' pow'rs of sin yo' am scornin'!)
Look about an' look aroun',
Fling yo' sin pack on d' groun'.
(Yo' will meet wid d' Lord in d' mornin'!)"

A sound of scrambling accompanied the song, and the spirit of the place fled away on the heels of the red-coated buck. The green screen was burst asunder, and a man peered out at the meadow and the pool and the sloping sidehill. He was a deliberate sort of man. He took in the scene with one embracing glance, then ran his eyes over the details to verify the general impression. Then, and not until then, did he open his mouth in vivid and solemn approval:

"Smoke of life an' snakes of purgatory! Will you just look at that! Wood an' water an' grass an' a sidehill! A pocket hunter's delight an' a cayuse's paradise! Cool green for tired eyes! Pink pills for pale people ain't in it. A secret pasture for prospectors and a resting place for tired burros, by damn!"

HE was a sandy-complexioned man in whose face geniality and humor seemed the salient characteristics. It was a mobile face, quick-changing to inward mood and thought. Thinking was in him a visible process. Ideas chased across his face like windflaws across the surface of a lake. His hair, sparse and unkempt of growth, was as indeterminate and colorless as his complexion. It would seem that all the color of his frame had gone into his eyes, for they were startlingly blue. Also they were laughing and merry eyes, within them much of the naïveté and wonder of the child; and yet, in an unassertive way, they contained much of calm self-reliance and strength of purpose founded upon self-experience and experience of the world.

From out the screen of vines and creepers he flung ahead of him a miner's pick and shovel and gold pan. Then he crawled out himself into the open. He was clad in faded overalls and black cotton shirt, with hobnailed brogans on his feet, and on his head a hat whose shapelessness and stains advertised the rough usage of wind and rain and sun and camp smoke. He stood erect, seeing wide-eyed the secrecy of the scene and sensuously inhaling the warm, sweet breath of the canyon garden through nostrils that dilated and quivered with delight. His eyes narrowed to laughing slits of blue, his face wreathed itself in joy, and his mouth curled in a smile as he cried aloud:

"Jumping dandelions and happy holly-

hocks, but that smells good to me! Talk about your attar o' roses an' cologne factories! They ain't in it!"

He had the habit of soliloquy. His quick-changing facial expressions might tell every thought and mood, but the tongue, perforce, ran hard after, repeating, like a second Boswell.

The man lay down on the lip of the pool and drank long and deep of its water. "Tastes good to me," he murmured, lifting his head and gazing across the pool at the sidehill, while he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. The sidehill attracted his attention. Still lying on his stomach, he studied the hill formation long and carefully. It was a practiced eye that traveled up the slope to the crumbling canyon wall and back and down again to the edge of the pool. He scrambled to his feet and favored the sidehill with a second survey.

"Looks good to me," he concluded, picking up his pick and shovel and gold pan.

He crossed the stream below the pool, stepping agilely from stone to stone. Where the sidehill touched the water he dug up a shovelful of dirt and put it into the gold pan. He squatted down, holding the pan in his two hands, and partly immersing it in the stream. Then he imparted to the pan a deft circular motion that sent the water sluicing in and out through the dirt and gravel. The larger and the lighter particles worked to the surface, and these, by a skillful dipping movement of the pan, he spilled out and over the edge. Occasionally, to expedite matters, he rested the pan and with his fingers raked out the large pebbles and pieces of rock.

The contents of the pan diminished rapidly until only fine dirt and the smallest bits of gravel remained. At this stage he began to work very deliberately and carefully. It was fine washing, and he washed fine and finer, with a keen scrutiny and delicate and fastidious touch. At last the pan seemed empty of everything but water; but with a quick semicircular flirt that sent the water flying over the shallow rim into the stream he disclosed a layer of black sand on the bottom of the pan. So thin was this layer that it was like a streak of paint. He examined it closely. In the midst of it was a tiny golden speck. He dribbled a little water in over the depressed edge of the pan. With a quick flirt he sent the water sluicing across the bottom, turning the grains of black sand over and over. A second tiny golden speck rewarded his effort.

THE washing had now become very fine—fine beyond all need of ordinary placer mining. He worked the black sand, a small portion at a time, up the shallow rim of the pan. Each small portion he examined sharply, so that his eyes saw every grain of it before he allowed it to slide over the edge and away. Jealously, bit by bit, he let the black sand slip away. A golden speck, no larger than a pin point, appeared on the rim, and by his manipulation of the water it returned to the bottom of the pan. And in such fashion another speck was disclosed, and another. Great was his care of them. Like a shepherd he herded his flock of golden specks so that not one should be lost. At last, of the pan of dirt nothing remained but his golden herd. He counted it, and then, after all his labor, sent it flying out of the pan with one final swirl of water.

But his blue eyes were shining with desire as he rose to his feet. "Seven," he muttered aloud, asserting the sum of the specks for which he had toiled so hard and which he had so wantonly thrown away. "Seven," he repeated, with the emphasis of one trying to impress a number on his memory.

He stood still a long while, surveying the hillside. In his eyes was a curiosity, new-aroused and burning. There was an exultance about his bearing and a keenness like that of a hunting animal catching the fresh scent of game.

He moved down the stream a few steps and took a second panful of dirt.

Again came the careful washing, the jealous herding of the golden specks, and the wantonness with which he sent them flying into the stream when he had counted their number.

"Five," he muttered, and repeated, "five."

He could not forbear another survey of the hill before filling the pan farther down

the stream. His golden herds diminished. "Four, three, two, two, one," were his memory tabulations as he moved down the stream. When but one speck of gold rewarded his washing he stopped and built a fire of dry twigs. Into this he thrust the gold pan and burned it till it was blue-black. He held up the pan and examined it critically. Then he nodded approbation. Against such a color background he could defy the tiniest yellow speck to elude him.

Still moving down the stream, he panned again. A single speck was his reward. A third pan contained no gold at all. Not satisfied with this, he panned three times again, taking his shovels of dirt within a foot of one another. Each pan proved empty of gold, and the fact, instead of discouraging him, seemed to give him satisfaction. His elation increased with each barren washing, until he arose, exclaiming jubilantly:

"If it ain't the real thing, may God knock off my head with sour apples!"

Returning to where he had started operations, he began to pan up the stream. At first his golden herds increased—increased prodigiously. "Fourteen, eighteen, twenty-one, twenty-six," ran his memory tabulations. Just above the pool he struck his richest pan—thirty-five colors.

"Almost enough to save," he remarked regretfully as he allowed the water to sweep them away.

The sun climbed to the top of the sky. The man worked on. Pan by pan he went up the stream, the tally of results steadily decreasing.

"It's just booful, the way it peters out," he exulted when a shovelful of dirt contained no more than a single speck of gold.

And when no specks at all were found in several pans he straightened up and favored the hillside with a confident glance.

"Aha! Mr. Pocket!" he cried out as though to an auditor hidden somewhere above him beneath the surface of the slope. "Aha! Mr. Pocket! I'm a-comin', I'm a-comin', an' I'm shorely gwine to get yer! You heah me, Mr. Pocket? I'm gwine to get yer as shore as punkins ain't cauliflowers!"

He turned and flung a measuring glance at the sun poised above him in the azure of the cloudless sky. Then he went down the canyon, following the line of shovel holes he had made in filling the pans. He crossed the stream below the pool and disappeared through the green screen. There was little opportunity for the spirit of the place to return with its quietude and repose, for the man's voice, raised in ragtime song, still dominated the canyon with possession.

After a time, with a greater clashing of steel-shod feet on rock, he returned. The green screen was tremendously agitated. It surged back and forth in the throes of a struggle. There was a loud grating and clanging of metal. The man's voice leaped to a higher pitch and was sharp with imperativeness. A large body plunged and panted. There was a snapping and ripping and rending, and amid a shower of falling leaves a horse burst through the screen. On its back was a pack, and from this trailed broken vines and torn creepers. The animal gazed with astonished eyes at the scene into which it had been precipitated, then dropped its head to the grass and began contentedly to graze. A second horse scrambled into view, slipping once on the mossy rocks and regaining equilibrium when its hoofs sank into the yielding surface of the meadow. It was riderless, though on its back was a high-horned Mexican saddle, scarred and discolored by long usage.

The man brought up the rear. He threw off pack and saddle, with an eye to camp location, and gave the animals their freedom to graze. He unpacked his food and got out frying pan and coffeepot. He gathered an armful of dry wood, and with a few stones made a place for his fire.

"My," he said, "but I've got an appetite! I could scoff iron filings an' horseshoe nails an' thank you kindly, ma'am, for a second helpin'."

He straightened up, and while he reached for matches in the pocket of his overalls his eyes traveled across the pool to the sidehill. His fingers had clutched the matchbox, but they relaxed their hold and the hand came out empty. The man wavered perceptibly. He looked at his preparations for cooking and he looked at the hill.

"Guess I'll take another whack at her," he concluded, starting to cross the stream.

"They ain't no sense in it, I know," he mumbled apologetically. "But keepin' grub back an hour ain't goin' to hurt none, I reckon."

A few feet back from his first line of test pans he started a second line. The sun dropped down the western sky, the shadows lengthened, but the man worked on. He began a third line of test pans. He was crosscutting the hillside, line by line, as he ascended. The center of each line produced the richest pans, while the ends came where no colors showed in the pan. And as he ascended the hillside the lines grew perceptibly shorter. The regularity with which their length diminished served to indicate that somewhere up the slope the last line would be so short as to have scarcely length at all, and that beyond could come only a point. The design was growing into an inverted V. The converging sides of this V marked the boundaries of the gold-bearing dirt.

The apex of the V was evidently the man's goal. Often he ran his eye along the converging sides and on up the hill, trying to divine the apex, the point where the gold-bearing dirt must cease. Here resided "Mr. Pocket"—for so the man familiarly addressed the imaginary point above him on the slope, crying out.

"Come down out o' that, Mr. Pocket! Be right smart an' agreeable, an' come down!"

"ALL right," he would add later, in a voice resigned to determination. "All right, Mr. Pocket. It's plain to me I got to come right up an' snatch you out bald-headed. An' I'll do it! I'll do it!" he would threaten still later.

Each pan he carried down to the water to wash, and as he went higher up the hill the pans grew richer, until he began to save the gold in an empty baking-powder can which he carried carelessly in his lap pocket. So engrossed was he in his toil that he did not notice the long twilight of oncoming night. It was not until he tried vainly to see the gold colors in the bottom of the pan that he realized the passage of time. He straightened up abruptly. An expression of whimsical wonderment and awe overspread his face as he drawled:

"Gosh darn my buttons, if I didn't plumb forget dinner!"

He stumbled across the stream in the darkness and lighted his long-delayed fire. Flapjacks and bacon and warmed-over beans constituted his supper. Then he smoked a pipe by the smoldering coals, listening to the night noises and watching the moonlight stream through the canyon. After that he unrolled his bed, took off his heavy shoes, and pulled the blankets up to his chin. His face showed white in the moonlight, like the face of a corpse. But it was a corpse that knew its resurrection, for the man rose suddenly on one elbow and gazed across at his hillside.

"Good night, Mr. Pocket," he called sleepily. "Good night."

He slept through the early gray of morning until the direct rays of the sun smote his closed eyelids, when he awoke with a start and looked about him until he had established the continuity of his existence and identified his present self with the days previously lived.

To dress, he had merely to buckle on his shoes. He glanced at his fireplace and at his hillside, wavered, but fought down the temptation and started the fire.

"Keep yer shirt on, Bill; keep yer shirt on," he admonished himself. "What's the good of rushin'? No use in gettin' all het up an' sweaty. Mr. Pocket'll wait for you. He ain't a-runnin' away before you can get yer breakfast. Now what you want, Bill, is something fresh in yer bill o' fare. So it's up to you to go an' get it."

He cut a short pole at the water's edge and drew from one of his pockets a bit of line and a draggled fly that had once been a royal coachman.

"Mebbe they'll bite in the early morning," he muttered as he made his first cast into the pool. And a moment later he was gleefully crying: "What'd I tell you, eh? What'd I tell you?"

He had no reel nor any inclination to waste time, and by main strength, and swiftly, he drew out of the water a flashing ten-inch trout. Three more, caught in rapid succession, furnished his breakfast. When he came to the steppingstones on his way

to his hillside, he was struck by a sudden thought, and paused.

"I'd just better take a hike downstream a ways," he said. "There's no tellin' what cuss may be snoopin' around."

But he crossed over on the stones, and with a "I really oughter take that hike" the need of the precaution passed out of his mind and he fell to work.

At nightfall he straightened up. The small of his back was stiff from stooping toil, and as he put his hand behind him to soothe the protesting muscles he said:

"Now what d'ye think of that, by damn? I clean forgot my dinner again! If I don't watch out I'll sure be degeneratin' into a two-meal-a-day crank."

"POCKETS is the damnedest things I ever see for makin' a man absent-minded," he communed that night as he crawled into his blankets. Nor did he forget to call up the hillside, "Good night, Mr. Pocket! Good night!"

Rising with the sun, and snatching a hasty breakfast, he was early at work. A fever seemed to be growing in him, nor did the increasing richness of the test pans allay this fever. There was a flush in his cheek other than that made by the heat of the sun, and he was oblivious to fatigue and the passage of time. When he filled a pan with dirt he ran down the hill to wash it; nor could he forbear running up the hill again, panting and stumbling profanely, to refill the pan.

He was now a hundred yards from the water, and the inverted V was assuming definite proportions. The width of the pay dirt steadily decreased, and the man extended in his mind's eye the sides of the V to their meeting place far up the hill. This was his goal, the apex of the V, and he panned many times to locate it.

"Just about two yards above that manzanita bush an' a yard to the right," he finally concluded.

Then the temptation seized him. "As plain as the nose on your face," he said as he abandoned his laborious crosscutting and climbed to the indicated apex. He filled a pan and carried it down the hill to wash. It contained no trace of gold. He dug deep, and he dug shallow, filling and washing a dozen pans, and was unrewarded even by the tiniest golden speck. He was enraged at having yielded to the temptation, and cursed himself blasphemously and pridelessly. Then he went down the hill and took up the crosscutting.

"Slow an' certain, Bill; slow an' certain," he crooned. "Short cuts to fortune ain't in your line, an' it's about time you know it. Get wise, Bill; get wise. Slow an' certain's the only hand you can play; so go to it, an' keep to it, too."

As the crosscuts decreased, showing that the sides of the V were converging, the depth of the V increased. The gold trace was dipping into the hill. It was only at thirty inches beneath the surface that he could get colors in his pan. The dirt he found at twenty-five inches from the surface, and at thirty-five inches, yielded barren pans. At the base of the V, by the water's edge, he had found the gold colors at the grass roots. The higher he went up the hill, the deeper the gold dipped. To dig a hole three feet deep in order to get one test pan was a task of no mean magnitude; while between the man and the apex intervened an untold number of such holes to be dug. "An' there's no tellin' how much deeper it'll pitch," he sighed in a moment's pause, while his fingers soothed his aching back.

Feverish with desire, with aching back and stiffening muscles, with pick and shovel gouging and mauling the soft brown earth, the man toiled up the hill. Before him was the smooth slope, spangled with flowers and made sweet with their breath. Behind him was devastation. It looked like some terrible eruption breaking out on the smooth skin of the hill. His slow progress was like that of a slug, befouling beauty with a monstrous trail.

Though the dipping gold trace increased the man's work, he found consolation in the increasing richness of the pans. Twenty cents, thirty cents, fifty cents, sixty cents, were the values of the gold found in the pans, and at nightfall he washed his banner pan, which gave him a dollar's worth of gold dust from a shovelful of dirt.

"I'll just bet it's my luck to have some inquisitive cuss come buttin' in here on my pasture," he mumbled sleepily that night

as he pulled the blankets up to his chin.

Suddenly he sat upright. "Bill!" he called sharply. "Now listen to me, Bill; d'ye hear! It's up to you, tomorrow mornin', to mosey round an' see what you can see. Understand? Tomorrow morning, an' don't you forget it!"

He yawned and glanced across at his sidehill. "Good night, Mr. Pocket," he called.

IN the morning he stole a march on the sun, for he had finished breakfast when its first rays caught him, and he was climbing the wall of the canyon where it crumbled away and gave footing. From the outlook at the top he found himself in the midst of loneliness. As far as he could see, chain after chain of mountains heaved themselves into his vision. To the east his eyes, leaping the miles between range and range and between many ranges, brought up at last against the white-peaked Sierras—the main crest, where the backbone of the Western world reared itself against the sky. To the north and south he could see more distinctly the cross systems that broke through the main trend of the sea of mountains. To the west the ranges fell away, one behind the other, diminishing and fading into the gentle foothills that, in turn, descended into the great valley which he could not see.

And in all that mighty sweep of earth he saw no sign of man nor of the handiwork of man—save only the torn bosom of the hillside at his feet. The man looked long and carefully. Once, far down his own canyon, he thought he saw in the air a faint hint of smoke. He looked again and decided that it was the purple haze of the hills made dark by a convolution of the canyon wall at its back.

"Hey, you, Mr. Pocket!" he called down into the canyon. "Stand out from under! I'm a-comin', Mr. Pocket! I'm a-comin'!"

The heavy brogans on the man's feet made him appear clumsy-footed, but he swung down from the giddy height as lightly and airily as a mountain goat. A rock, turning under his foot on the edge of the precipice, did not disconcert him. He seemed to know the precise time required for the turn to culminate in disaster, and in the meantime he utilized the false footing itself for the momentary earth contact necessary to carry him on into safety. Where the earth sloped so steeply that it was impossible to stand for a second upright, the man did not hesitate. His foot pressed the impossible surface for but a fraction of the fatal second and gave him the bound that carried him onward. Again, where even the fraction of a second's footing was out of the question, he would swing his body past by a moment's handgrip on a jutting knob of rock, a crevice, or a precariously rooted shrub. At last, with a wild leap and yell, he exchanged the face of the wall for an earth slide and finished the descent in the midst of several tons of sliding earth and gravel.

His first pan of the morning washed out over two dollars in coarse gold. It was from the center of the V. To either side the diminiution in the values of the pans was swift. His lines of crosscutting holes were growing very short. The converging sides of the inverted V were only a few yards apart. Their meeting point was only a few yards above him. But the pay streak was dipping deeper and deeper into the earth. By early afternoon he was sinking the test holes five feet before the pans could show the gold trace.

For that matter the gold trace had become something more than a trace; it was a placer mine in itself, and the man resolved to come back after he had found the pocket and work over the ground. But the increasing richness of the pans began to worry him. By late afternoon the worth of the pans had grown to three and four dollars. The man scratched his head perplexedly and looked a few feet up the hill at the manzanita bush that marked approximately the apex of the V. He nodded his head and said oracularly:

"It's one o' two things, Bill; one o' two things. Either Mr. Pocket's spilled himself all out an' down the hill, or else Mr. Pocket's that damned rich you maybe won't be able to carry him all away with you. And that'd be hell, wouldn't it, now?" He chuckled at contemplation of so pleasant a dilemma.

Nightfall found him by the edge of the

stream, his eyes wrestling with the gathering darkness over the washing of a five-dollar pan.

"Wisht I had an electric light to go on working," he said.

He found sleep difficult that night. Many times he composed himself and closed his eyes for slumber to overtake him; but his blood pounded with too strong desire, and as many times his eyes opened and he murmured wearily, "Wisht it was sunup."

Sleep came to him in the end, but his eyes were open with the first paling of the stars, and the gray of dawn caught him with breakfast finished and climbing the hillside in the direction of the secret abiding place of Mr. Pocket.

The first crosscut the man made, there was space for only three holes, so narrow had become the pay streak and so close was he to the fountainhead of the golden stream he had been following for four days.

"Be ca'm, Bill; be ca'm," he admonished himself as he broke ground for the final hole where the sides of the V had at last come together in a point.

"I've got the almighty cinch on you, Mr. Pocket, an' you can't lose me," he said many times as he sank the hole deeper and deeper.

Four feet, five feet, six feet, he dug his way down into the earth. The digging grew harder. His pick grated on broken rock. He examined the rock. "Rotten quartz," was his conclusion as, with the shovel, he cleared the bottom of the hole of loose dirt. He attacked the crumbling quartz with the pick, bursting the disintegrating rock asunder with every stroke.

He thrust his shovel into the loose mass. His eye caught a gleam of yellow. He dropped the shovel and squatted suddenly on his heels. As a farmer rubs the clinging earth from fresh-dug potatoes, so the man, a piece of rotten quartz held in both hands, rubbed the dirt away.

"Sufferin' Sardanopolis!" he cried. "Lumps an' chunks of it! Lumps an' chunks of it!"

It was only half rock he held in his hand. The other half was virgin gold. He dropped it into his pan and examined another piece. Little yellow was to be seen, but with his strong fingers he crumbled the rotten quartz away till both hands were filled with glowing yellow. He rubbed the dirt away from fragment after fragment, tossing them into the gold pan. It was a treasure hole. So much had the quartz rotted away that there was less of it than there was of gold. Now and again he found a piece to which no rock clung—a piece that was all gold. A chunk, where the pick had laid open the heart of the gold, glittered like a handful of yellow jewels, and he cocked his head at it and slowly turned it around and over to observe the rich play of the light upon it.

"Talk about yer Too Much Gold diggin's!" the man snorted contemptuously. "Why, this diggin'd make it look like thirty cents. This diggin' is all gold. An' right here an' now I name this yere canyon 'All Gold Canyon,' b' gosh!"

STILL squatting on his heels, he continued examining the fragments and tossing them into the pan. Suddenly there came to him a premonition of danger. It seemed a shadow had fallen upon him. But there was no shadow. His heart had given a great jump up into his throat and was choking him. Then his blood slowly chilled and he felt the sweat of his shirt cold against his flesh.

He did not spring up nor look around. He did not move. He was considering the nature of the premonition he had received, trying to locate the source of the mysterious force that had warned him, striving to sense the imperative presence of the unseen thing that threatened him. There is an aura of things hostile, made manifest by messengers too refined for the senses to know; and this aura he felt, but knew not how he felt it. His was the feeling as when a cloud passes over the sun. It seemed that between him and life had passed something dark and smothering and menacing; a gloom, as it were, that swallowed up life and made for death—his death.

Every force of his being impelled him to spring up and confront the unseen danger, but his soul dominated the panic, and he remained squatting on his heels, in

his hands a chunk of gold. He did not dare to look around, but he knew by now that there was something behind him and above him. He made believe to be interested in the gold in his hand. He examined it critically, turned it over and over, and rubbed the dirt from it. And all the time he knew that something behind him was looking at the gold over his shoulder.

Still feigning interest in the chunk of gold in his hand, he listened intently and he heard the breathing of the thing behind him. His eyes searched the ground in front of him for a weapon, but they saw only the uprooted gold, worthless to him now in his extremity. There was his pick, a handy weapon on occasion; but this was not such an occasion. The man realized his predicament. He was in a narrow hole that was seven feet deep. His head did not come to the surface of the ground. He was in a trap.

He remained squatting on his heels. He was quite cool and collected; but his mind, considering every factor, showed him only his helplessness. He continued rubbing the dirt from the quartz fragments and throwing the gold into the pan. There was nothing else for him to do. Yet he knew that he would have to rise up, sooner or later, and face the danger that breathed at his back. The minutes passed, and with the passage of each minute he knew that by so much he was nearer the time when he must stand up or else—and his wet shirt went cold against his flesh again at the thought—or else he might receive death as he stooped there over his treasure.

Still he squatted on his heels, rubbing dirt from gold and debating in just what manner he should rise up. He might rise up with a rush and claw his way out of the hole to meet whatever threatened on the even footing aboveground. Or he might rise up slowly and carelessly, and feign casually to discover the thing that breathed at his back. His instinct and every fighting fiber of his body favored the mad, clawing rush to the surface.

His intellect, and the craft thereof, favored the slow and cautious meeting with the thing that menaced and which he could not see. And while he debated, a loud, crashing noise burst on his ear. At the same instant he received a stunning blow on the left side of the back, and from the point of impact felt a rush of flame through his flesh. He sprang up in the air, but halfway to his feet collapsed. His body crumpled in like a leaf withered in sudden heat, and he came down, his chest across his pan of gold, his face in the dirt and rock, his legs tangled and twisted because of the restricted space at the bottom of the hole. His legs twitched convulsively several times. His body was shaken as with a mighty ague. There was a slow expansion of the lungs, accompanied by a deep sigh. Then the air was slowly, very slowly, exhaled, and his body as slowly flattened itself down into inertness.

Above, revolver in hand, a man was peering down over the edge of the hole. He peered for a long time at the prone and motionless body beneath him. After a while the stranger sat down on the edge of the hole so that he could see into it, and rested the revolver on his knee. Reaching his hand into a pocket, he drew out a wisp of brown paper. Into this he dropped a few crumbs of tobacco. The combination became a cigarette, brown and squat, with the ends turned in. Not once did he take his eyes from the body at the bottom of the hole. He lighted the cigarette and drew its smoke into his lungs with a caressing intake of the breath. He smoked slowly. Once the cigarette went out and he relighted it. And all the while he studied the body beneath him.

In the end he tossed the cigarette stub away and rose to his feet. He moved to the edge of the hole. Spanning it, a hand resting on each edge, and with the revolver still in the right hand, he muscled his body down into the hole. While his feet were yet a yard from the bottom he released his hands and dropped down.

At the instant his feet struck bottom he saw the pocket miner's arm leap out, and his own legs knew a swift, jerking grip that overthrew him. In the nature of the jump his revolver hand was above his head. Swiftly as the grip had flashed about his legs, just as swiftly he brought the revolver down. He was still in the air, his fall in process of completion, when he pulled the triger. The explosion was

deafening in the confined space. The smoke filled the hole so that he could see nothing.

He struck the bottom on his back, and like a cat's the pocket miner's body was on top of him. Even as the miner's body passed on top, the stranger crooked in his right arm to fire; and even in that instant the miner, with a quick thrust of elbow, struck his wrist. The muzzle was thrown up and the bullet thudded into the dirt of the side of the hole.

THE next instant the stranger felt the miner's hand grip his wrist. The struggle was now for the revolver. Each man strove to turn it against the other's body. The smoke in the hole was clearing. The stranger, lying on his back, was beginning to see dimly. But suddenly he was blinded by a handful of dirt deliberately flung into his eyes by his antagonist. In that moment of shock his grip on the revolver was broken. In the next moment he felt a smashing darkness descend upon his brain, and in the midst of the darkness even the darkness ceased.

But the pocket miner fired again and again, until the revolver was empty. Then he tossed it from him and, breathing heavily, sat down on the dead man's legs.

The miner was sobbing and struggling for breath. "Measly skunk!" he panted; "a-campin' on my trail an' lettin' me do the work, an' then shootin' me in the back!"

He was half crying from anger and exhaustion.

He peered at the face of the dead man. It was sprinkled with loose dirt and gravel, and it was difficult to distinguish the features.

"Never laid eyes on him before," the miner concluded his scrutiny. "Just a common an' ordinary thief, damn him! An' he shot me in the back! He shot me in the back!"

He opened his shirt and felt himself, front and back, on his left side.

"Went clean through, and no harm done!" he cried jubilantly. "I'll bet he aimed all right, all right; but he drew the gun over when he pulled the trigger—the cuss! But I fixed 'm! Oh, I fixed 'm!"

His fingers were investigating the bullet hole in his side, and a shade of regret passed over his face. "It's goin' to be stiffer'n hell," he said. "An' it's up to me to get mended an' get out o' here."

He crawled out of the hole and went down the hill to his camp. Half an hour later he returned, leading his pack horse. His open shirt disclosed the rude bandages with which he had dressed his wound. He was slow and awkward with his left-hand movements, but that did not prevent his using the arm.

The bight of the pack rope under the dead man's shoulders enabled him to heave the body out of the hole. Then he set to work gathering up his gold. He worked steadily for several hours, pausing often to rest his stiffening shoulder and to exclaim:

"He shot me in the back, the measly skunk! He shot me in the back!"

When his treasure was quite cleaned up and wrapped securely into a number of blanket-covered parcels, he made an estimate of its value.

"Four hundred pounds, or I'm a Hottentot," he concluded. "Say two hundred in quartz an' dirt—that leaves two hundred pounds of gold. Bill! Wake up! Two hundred pounds of gold! Forty thousand dollars! An' it's yourn—all yourn!"

He scratched his head delightedly and his fingers blundered into an unfamiliar groove. They quested along it for several inches.

It was a crease through his scalp where the second bullet had plowed.

He walked angrily over to the dead man.

"You would, would you?" he bullied. "You would, eh? Well, I fixed you good an' plenty, an' I'll give you decent burial, too. That's more'n you'd have done for me."

He dragged the body to the edge of the hole and toppled it in. It struck the bottom with a dull crash, on its side, the face twisted up to the light. The miner peered down at it.

"An' you shot me in the back!" he said accusingly.

With pick and shovel he filled the hole. Then he loaded the gold on his horse. It was too great a load for the animal, and

when he had gained his camp he transferred part of it to his saddle horse. Even so, he was compelled to abandon a portion of his outfit—pick and shovel and gold pan, extra food and cooking utensils, and divers odds and ends.

The sun was at the zenith when the man forced the horses at the screen of vines and creepers. To climb the huge boulders the animals were compelled to uprear and struggle blindly through the tangled mass of vegetation. Once the saddle horse fell heavily and the man removed the pack to get the animal on its feet. After it started on its way again the man thrust his head out from among the leaves and peered up at the hillside.

"The measly skunk!" he said, and disappeared.

There was a ripping and tearing of vines and boughs. The trees surged back and forth, marking the passage of the animals through the midst of them. There was a clashing of steel-shod hoofs on stone, and now and again an oath or a sharp cry of command. Then the voice of the man was raised in song:

"Tu'n around an' tu'n yo' face
Untoe them sweet hills of grace.
(D' pow'rs of sin yo' am scornin'!)
Look about an' look aroun',
Fling yo' sin pack on d' groun'.
(Yo' will meet wid d' Lord in d' mornin'!)"

The song grew faint and fainter, and through the silence crept back the spirit of the place. The stream once more drowsed and whispered; the hum of the mountain bees rose sleepily. Down through the perfume-weighted air fluttered the snowy fluffs of the cottonwoods. The butterflies drifted in and out among the trees, and over all blazed the quiet sunshine. Only remained the hoofmarks in the meadow and the torn hillside to mark the boisterous trail of the life that had broken the peace of the place and passed on.

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LADY BUSHWACK

By HARRISON BENJAMIN

Where a blonde bombshell is on the move; where she's proddin' trigger-happy gunnies with a sly smile and a fond hope . . . there you'll find smoke and fight and bullets—and a cowman's paradise turned into a graveyard for misled gunswifts.

VAUGHN, N. M., is a hole, always windy and dry—dust a-foggin'—but Pete Goggin's Last Chance is all right.

"You never saw the beat," Lee Hanley was saying. He was telling me about the Dot N' Dash ranch where he'd been riding for over a year.

I let his descriptive words flow through me. The Soft Hills and the Dot N' Dash

As my hands reached out for the canteen, his blue-black gun cleared leather.

were about twenty miles from Vaughn, the county seat. A twenty-mile strip of narrow washes choked with gray-green mesquite, powder-soft, purple sand, and here and there a "barrel" cactus. Then the Soft Hills began, and that's what they were—Soft Hills—gently rolling water sheds.

First, they flattened out to form several small valleys, then they rose to the jutting Sierritas. It seemed there were only two ranches between Vaughn, the country seat, and Summit, a sleepy little cowtown on the edge of the mountains. Both ranches were large, over twenty hands, the Dot N' Dash and the Halfmoon.

"Yessirree, you never saw the like—" Lee began for the third time. "The ranch buildings set right in the head of a valley. Big, clear, cool spring gushes out an' makes a creek. Deep enough to swim in. Water all year 'round. Oak an' pine two-men thick for shade."

"All right, all right," I said. "I'll take your word for it. What yuh workin' up to, feller? You're not in business as a land agent."

Lee grinned and lifted his glass. "Yessirree, you'd like it at the Dot N' Dash. You'd like workin' for ol' man Withers."

"Work is serious to the unemployed, Lee," I said. "But I'm on leave from the Cattleman's Association. You know that."

"That won't hinder the job old man Joe

has for someone like you if you want to tackle it?"

I saw that Lee had gone dead serious. I picked up my black felt. "The Soft Hills sound nice. They're new to me, and without a doubt the Dot N' Dash is as sweet as heaven, but I'm not ridin' fence nor punchin' cows on my vacation."

"Oh, it's not handlin' stock," The brown-faced puncher said quickly. "It's a job right up your alley. And at your own rates."

"Rustlers?" I said. "It's always rustlers."

"Yes an' no. Joe will be satisfied if you find his son."

"What—" I was surprised. "Did you say his son? What happened to the kid?"

"S'not a kid," said Lee. "Little Joe Withers is a grown man." Lee filled his glass with amber liquid. But seeing the watchful eye of the bartender upon his keg, he slid a silver dollar across the bar. "Yep. Little Joe Withers is a man. But the funny part is nobody knows where he is. A couple of years ago there was a shootin', and it looked like Little Joe was the man behind the gun. It was one of those real bad kind of killin's. The kind they put a rope around your neck for. Little Joe lit out. South, they think, into the badlands, or across the valley completely. I never did get the whole story. But now a lot of the red mist has gone an' the old man wants the kid back to stand trial. You see, he always believed him innocent. However, he can't seem to get word to him."

"Why not?" I asked.

"EVERY messenger he sends gets killed or disappears." Lee shrugged his shoulders. "I guess the old man figures that he will cash in pretty soon. He wants to get the kid straightened out so he can turn over the ranch to him. He doesn't want to saddle Millie with it in the condition it's in."

"Millie?"

"She's his daughter—well, not exactly. She's the daughter of an old friend. Old man Withers adopted her."

"Is Millie the reason you're so interested?"

"Yeah, sort of—" Lee smiled that contented smile that men get on their faces when they speak of women. Nice women, that is.

"Well, I don't know, Lee." I got out the makin's and built myself a smoke. "I suppose I have got the time, and it doesn't sound so bad."

"There's a hitch," said Lee. "Little Joe's supposed to be mighty fast with his iron. He doesn't know you and you don't him. He'll likely figure you as a ranger or a marshal or maybe a friend of Ike Jonson's that couldn't forget. Remember, the old man can't send word to Little Joe that you're comin' down Mexico-way with a pretty red tulip in your hat-band, and that he's not to shoot nor run when he sees you."

"Does this old rancher want his missing boy bad enough to pay?"

"I told you, Willard. You can punch your own ticket."

"Why don't you take it, Lee?"

The brownfaced puncher's grin was embarrassed.

"Millie. She figures that it's too risky. You know how women are?"

"I see," I paused and straightened my levis in my boot-tops. "And the old man wants to preserve his future son-in-law?"

Lee shook his head and a faint, dark shadow of uneasiness moved across his face. "The old man doesn't know about Millie and me. He kind of has the notion that Millie and Little Joe—" He let his voice dwindle, and sloshed the liquid in his glass. "Millie—she—we—we haven't told him yet."

I looked up at the huge pair of razor-sharp longhorns that formed the bar ornament. "But you have an understanding with her, is that it?"

"Weeelll, not exactly. We just— Oh, hell, Willard, when you get to know Millie you'll see what I'm trying to say. She's not the kind that makes deals. With her it's more definite."

"Nothing's definite with a woman." I like to hand out advice, especially to love-sick cowpunchers. "If it's like that with you, you better marry her before you go south with old man Withers right behind you. Nothing's definite."

IT WAS a couple of days before I was ready to leave Vaughn. It was plain that I was going somewhere, but I hadn't told anyone where. I had paid $60 boot between my red roan and a giant Palomino stallion that I had spotted down at the livery stable. Also I had bought me some bags and filled them. So I was a bit amazed when I sauntered into the Last Chance on the night before I was to leave and Pete Goggin's asked me about it. Pete was Irish in looks, Indian in temperament, and Mexican by birth. If you'd asked me I'd have said that Pete was interested in only two things, neither of which was concerned with my welfare. However maybe he was a friend of Lee's.

"So, Meester Willard Parker," said Pete, running his fingers through his black hair, putting back his head and sneering in what must have been his idea of polite conversation. "So you think you go south, eh, and make beeg money?"

"Maybe," I admitted. "Who'd you get that idea from?"

Pete looked around ignoring the question. We were alone at one end of the bar. "You're a fool man," said Pete quietly, then he started to lapse into Spanish. "Uno hombre muy loco.—"

I broke in quickly. "Cut out the border lingo, Pete. You can speak English."

"You go for that Little Joe and you'll get a knife." Pete's inscrutable face was serious. "Even the great Willard Parker."

"I wasn't born yesterday, Pete." As I spoke I hoped that I wasn't boasting.

"Plenty, plenty dangerous in that border country. Three hombres have tried before and all are dead now."

"They weren't bullet-proof." I knew that I was boasting now.

"I warned you," grunted Pete, and moved away down the scarred mahogany, swiping at it with a wet rag.

What the slender bartender had said could be fairly easily explained. He could be just a nice gent and the story of the dead messengers could have come from some passing rider. I was satisfied with it, once I'd looked at it that way. I was satisfied with it all of the way back to my hotel room. I was even satisfied with it after I got there and was fumbling around in the dark for a match. Then something hard and small touched my backbone and I lost my satisfaction. Some people were altogether too interested in my chore of locating the prodigal son.

When I felt the gun boring into my spine I stopped my search for the matches. In fact I almost stopped breathing. My hands went up automatically.

"Just ease up and relax a little bit," said a rasping voice. "I don't like nervous people."

"Don't like them myself," I managed. "Especially when they have a gun on me . . . . I'll relax, pard, if you will?"

What I heard could have been a chuckle, then I felt my gun-belt suddenly go lighter. The slap of the gun on the spread also came to me as the unknown tossed it upon the bed.

"Now you go over to the window and face out." The voice sounded like it was being dragged over a gravel bed.

I had to hand it to whoever the whisperer was. Everything was nicely organized. I couldn't even have seen even if I'd have gotten a look around. The quick change from moonlight to blackness. I was picked out in the window like a picture in a frame.

Again I was entertained by the rusty chuckle. "Sure is a fine way to hold a conversation, ain't it? But I hear tell that you're Parker, so it pays to be careful."

"All right, all right," I said. "I'll give you that. It does pay to be careful. But where do we go from here?"

The voice behind me was fast and keen. "You're mighty impatient to a feller who's rode far and fast to get to conflab with you. Howsomever, if you ain't a talkin' ranny, maybe you can listen better. What I got to say is short and sweet but you better listen close. They're for your own good." There was a bite in those last words.

"Say it then," I said.

"IT'S THIS: Stay here in Vaughn. Or go East, or North, or West, but don't go into the Soft Hills, and don't go South. Got it?"

"I hear you talkin'," I said bravely. "All but the words."

"Then I'll be plainer." The whisper re-

minded me of the warning buzz of a rattler. "Don't fork your bronc lookin' anywhere for anybody. In two or three weeks there'll be a couple hundred greenbacks in the mail for you. It's easier than workin' and a sight safer."

"And all I have to do is wear out the seat of my jeans, eh?"

"That's all. Just sit tight and wait. Just don't take that job you was going out on."

I knew now that I was safe. "What if I don't like this part of New Mexico? What if I wait for the cash, then ride out on the job?"

"Then," said the whisperer in the softest kind of a tone. "Then, they'll find Mr. Willard Parker, Ace of the Cattlemen's Association, all dead some fine morning. With his handsome head shot right off." The voice sounded as if he'd enjoy doing that chore himself.

"I wouldn't like that atall, nosirree," I shook my head in the dark. "By the way, who is going to send me the money?"

The whiskery chuckle again. It was like a tow sack full of nails. "A real kind gent. And don't get curious, Parker."

"All right," I said. "But if it's Little Joe you can tell him that I wasn't going to put a chain on him."

The voice seemed to find this pretty funny. When the laughter was over, I said: "All right, feller, now you've handed me the cards. All you have to do is see whether I go through with the deal."

"You've got a whale of a break on this, Parker," the whisper sounded like the man was talking to himself. "I could burn a hole through you now, and that'd make sure that you stay put." There was a break, then—"Compromise with an Association man."

"You sure sound like you're trigger-happy."

"If you don't deal them cards, Parker, it'll be different next time."

I heard the scuffle of shoe leather and the soft squeal of the bedsprings, and knew that he had regained my .45.

"Your six will be at the bottom of the stairs." Then guessing my thoughts, he added: "I wouldn't try coming down too fast if I was you."

II

I GOT started early the next morning before the town was up. It was nice in the cool of the day and I didn't want anybody to know what direction I was taking. The old puncher who ran the hay and grain emporium was snoring loudly as I roped the Palomino, threw on the gear, and headed for the desert.

Even heading out in the early dawn this way I had the uneasy feeling that somebody was looking. I felt all tight and jumpy inside as if it was the morning after a night of bad liquor. When I got about a mile out of town I felt better, and let the big Palomino eat up the desert sand.

About seven miles from town, when I had topped a little sand ridge, I saw a distant cluster of gnarled cottonwoods and the bright green of bunch grass. It could only mean a spring. The green oasis was about three miles away. It did not occur to me to be careful, and I was anxious to reach it. Both the Palomino and myself needed water. The sun was high and hot.

When I pulled the horse up at the spring there was a puncher already there. He was sitting in a little clearing in the shade of the cottonwoods. He was dressed in ordinary work clothes, but he had a bright yellow neckpiece, and somehow the handkerchief gave him an evil look. However, he threw up his hand as though in a friendly greeting, and without thinking I answered his wave and dismounted.

I opened the cinch on the saddle and led the Palomino to the seep, then squatted on my heels and watched him drink. The lone puncher said nothing, just eyed me across the few feet of shallow water.

The stallion finished, and bending down, I began to scoop out a pit in the sand to drink myself. At that the man rose, and went to his rein-anchored horse. He unhooked a canteen from the saddle and tossed it to me.

"Catch," he said, in a husky whisper.

The whisper should have told me all I wanted.

The canteen sailed off to my right and automatically I put out my hand. When my

hand went out, his went down to his hip and came up full of blue-black gun. He held it on me steady as a rock. It was a nice, clean simple trick. I took the cap off of the canteen, lifted it, and drank. When the water hit my innards, it felt like liquid ice. I heard that gravelled chuckle from across the water.

"What I like about you, Parker, is the good, sensible way that you take things. Now, just keep that canteen in your right paw."

He moved over a bit and sat down by his horse.

"I figured it would work out this way." The whisperer sounded sad. "I told the boss that an Association man never sells out. Now look where you're at?"

"Where am I at?" I wished the desert sky wasn't so blue. It seemed mocking.

"At Sleton drink," said the whispering puncher. "Sleton's dead."

He let me chew on that one for a minute, then he reached around behind him and got one of those short, wide prospectors shovels. He had come prepared right enough.

"If I'd had a 30 30," he said. "I would have knocked you down out there in one of them washouts. But now you got to dig."

"Dig?" . . . "What for?"

"For nobody but you," he whispered.

I took up the shovel and he motioned me away from the spring and the protective cottonwoods. He stayed a comfortable distance behind me, so there wasn't a chance to swing the shovel.

"This'll do," he said, when we had marched about fifty feet, and come to a mesquite-filled draw. I slid down into it, while he remained above. "Make it about six feet long. I want you comfortable."

"Look," I said. "Maybe we can work this out?"

"Can't be done." The whisper sounded weary. "Like to 'commodate you, Parker. You acted like a fine hombre. You don't put on airs. I like your style but it can't be done. I gave you one chance, anyway. And around these parts one is enough."

"This boss of yours—"

"Dig," he whispered cuttingly. "All the talking is done."

The oddly purple sand was loose. It was easy to dig. Too easy. That desert grave would be finished years before I was ready for it. I was cold, but the sweat was popping out all over me. I could feel the spot the gun was lined on me. I knew that I couldn't get to my hideout in time, and he was too far away to reach with the shovel. The shovel was out anyway, he was too competent for that. I went on digging as slowly as I dared. Shovelfull after shovelfull.

When I got down to two feet I knew that it would be soon. Probably without warning. A two foot grave in this country was deep enough for anyone.

"How you comin'," he said. He was closer. He had slid down to join me in the little watershed. And that was his mistake.

"The sand's fine," I shouted, swinging a huge shovelfull of sand over my shoulder, and diving full length into the raw hole. I shivered as the shot ripped over me, and I heard his whispered oaths. "The sand. The damned sand," he was saying.

I had pulled the .25 as I went down, and quickly I rose to my knees and shot wildly in the direction of his voice. I wasn't caring about anything but getting the bullet away so that he would hear the gun, and not walk in on me.

However, that one shot did it.

Lucky?

Sure.

He sucked in his breath like a winded horse and I could see the blur of his body. I started to send a couple more shots into the middle of that blur but it wasn't necessary. He fell heavily into the hole. I had to scramble to keep him from falling on me.

All I had to do was to straighten him out and cover him over. I looked through his pockets but there wasn't a thing in them to tell me anything. Nothing in his saddle bags either. I didn't even find out who he was.

IT TOOK me almost the whole day to reach the Dot N' Dash. It was the first stages of twilight when I rode in. Lee was certainly right. The ranch was a picture. White adobe buildings, big shade

trees, and a real carpet lawn. The corrals and barns set a good piece from the main house.

An intelligent looking Indian, whom I took to be the cook, because of his white apron, appeared to be the only soul around. However, there were two saddled horses tied in the shade.

"About Mister Joe Withers," I said to the Indian. "Is he around?"

"He is discussing business just now." The Indian's English was stiff and bookish. "Whom shall I say is here?"

"Tell him it's Willard Parker. I think he knows me."

The Indian ushered me in, offered me a seat, and faded away. In scarcely a minute he was back. He led me down a large, cool hall and into a large room. There was a huge empty fireplace in the room with a divan and an armchair before it. A tall old man with a scraggly roan moustache and a hide-covered stump of a left hand stood by the chair. That would be Withers, I figured. There were two other men seated upon the divan.

One of the men was tall and dark. He had on high boots and a brown coat. He looked like a slick town dude. The other man was a slender blond. He could have passed for an ordinary puncher except for his eyes. They were hazel-green and knife-like. Back in the dimness of the room I glimpsed someone else. But it was only a white face, whoever it was.

"Parker," the man with the stump came forward. "I'm Withers, and right pleased to see you here. Lee said you'd come but I must admit we're imposin' on your vacation."

The oldster put out a hand that still had strength in it, and I found myself liking him at once. Snowy white hair and balding slightly, and with that hide-bound stump he seemed only half alive until he spoke. Then you could feel the vitality in him, as if his body were dying around something that refused to be touched.

He turned to the others on the divan and they stood up. "Like to have you meet Ed Jonson. He owns the Halfmoon which is between here and Summitt." I looked at the dark man. I had guessed him wrong on two counts—both on his occupation and the probable name of his brand. I took a second look as we shook hands briefly. I was wondering if he was any kin to the murdered Jonson.

"Now, Truce Robbins." The oldster indicated the small man. "He owns Wiltshires, a gamblin', bawdy house in Summitt. Owns practically the whole town too, might say. That right, Truce?"

Truce shook his head semi-modestly.

"Truce used to work for me," Withers' tone was scornful. "I fired him a few years ago. After that he decided a deck of cards was better than a 'piggin,' string. So I gave him his boost in life, you might say."

"Let's get down to cases, Withers," said Jonson, ignoring me. "I don't want to have to sit here all night chewin' the bait over old times. I'm tryin' to tell you that since you've got no herd in there I'm startin' Halfmoon cows into Warblin' Valley."

"You can't do that." The old man looked startled, cornered. "That's always been Dot N' Dash range."

"That was your range," muttered Jonson.

The dark man didn't even lift his head. He just turned and stomped from the room. The someone who had only been a ghostly blur got up and followed him. It was a print-frocked girl. As she came past me I got a flash of a beautiful, arrogant face; soft, ash-blonde hair; and a pair of eyes as willful and as unreadable as those of a wild Meztizo burro. That would be Millie, I guessed, and rightly. She did not speak, just swept past us.

The old man stared at the doorway through which she had just passed. His face was as stiff as wood carving. Only around the eyes was the worry and pain visible. Something about the blond girl was worrying him to death. Finally, he turned to me, brushing his forehead with the hide stump.

"My daughter, Millie," he explained. "Adopted daughter, you might say." His voice was full of love and pride as he spoke. "She's a mite wild and gamey, growing up out here alone—"

"What the hell do you expect," burst in

Truce. The small man's tone was bitter and vehement and for the first time his composure melted. I searched his face, and oddly there was much the same expression of love and galled-pride on his face as had been on that of the oldster's.

"Great jumpin' good morning," I thought. "There must be something here. That girl has every man I've met chasing around like a bear with honey on his tail." Then the Indian cook came in. I followed him here to the ranch kitchen.

THERE was food and hot coffee on the table. I went to work on it. Through the window I could see Jonson and the girl. He was lifting his shell belt and holster from his saddle horn and was buckling it about him. They were arguing about something but their words were indistinct. Jonson was facing the window. The lamplight softened his dark features.

Jonson lifted his hand to Millie's shoulder. She took a lithe backward step, shrugging it off with a practiced gesture. The man stood for a moment, looking like a dog that had been scolded, then he swung into his saddle. Millie said something as he turned away, then she came towards the house. Her head was lifted high, confident and scornful. I could see the devil-may-care attitude in her walk and the carriage of her body. "A woman like her could give you a hellova time," I thought.

I had finished with my meal when she came into the kitchen. I saw that her hair was lighter than it had seemed in the other room. It was short, but wavy as though it had wind in it. She seemed smaller too—probably about five foot three. She was built like a thorough-bred sprint horse, not long muscled, but short coupled and vibrant with spirit and vitality. However, she was the kind that could also get red-eyed and mean.

Millie sat down across from me and watched silently as I built a smoke. Then she reached across for my sack of Golden Grain and rolled herself one. She kept an eagle eye on me all the while to see how I would react. Well, plenty of women smoke pipes, so I suppose they might as well roll them too. I lit up, then held the match for her.

"I heard them say that you came from Vaughn." She blew a cloud of smoke. "What's it like?"

"Just another town." I said. "Horses, people, and trouble."

"It's big though. Lee says that it's a lot bigger than Summit." The girl's curiosity was pathetic. "I want to go to California. To 'Frisco. I have relatives there. Joe wants me to stay here, but—" Her mouth curled and her tone was defiant. "I don't give a hoot for the ol' ranch."

"I can see where it might be hard on a lone woman," I said. "Then again it might be a three ring circus." I kept my gaze out the window where I could now see Robbins. Robbins was tightening the cinch on his saddle. His stirrups were oversize. Real brush country stirrups.

When I glanced back Millie was following my gaze out the window and I knew that she had guessed that I had seen her with Jonson. However, she smiled mockingly with her head back and stared at me.

"He thinks it would be an easy way to get hold of the ranch," she nodded at Robbins who had mounted.

"Oh," I said.

"Joe wouldn't have us marry though. Joe would be sore. He's saving me until Little Joe gets back." Millie took a deep, savage pull on the cigarette, then snubbed it out.

"I got that notion too," I said. "But the old man wouldn't push things too far, would he? He wouldn't kill a man just because of your interest, would he?"

She opened her eyes wide. She cocked her head, and looked me over like she was seeing me for the first time. Then she laughed.

"You mean Ike Jonson? Don't be like that."

"I was just thinking." I scratched my head. "Lee Hanley's the same way, kind of."

"I'm sorry if Lee got that idea," she said.

"He has. Then it's true that you asked him not to turn his bronc south?"

Millie disposed of Lee. "Lee's nice. I like him, but he gets moonstruck too easy."

"Well," I was careful. "I guess that

makes you Little Joe's woman."

"I'm nobody's woman," Millie said quickly.

III

ROBBINS was in the big room when we got there. He appeared to be on the edge of leaving. He lifted his hat, and sought Millie's face, then his gaze dropped. "Hope you didn't have too bad a time ridin', Parker." His tone sounded genuine. "The strip of desert between here and Vaughn can be pretty tough."

"Oh the desert wasn't so bad," I said. "Except for having a bullet burn the air not two inches from my back."

Someone, the old man or Millie, drew a sharp breath, otherwise the room was silent.

"No one likes to be shot at." It was Robbins, but his tone was impersonal. He wasn't going to ask any questions but if I was going to talk he wanted to hear what I had to say.

The old man gave me a lead. "Who was it?"

"Somebody on a Dot N' Dash bay, usin' an old Texas center rig. Feller with a rusted whisper for a voice."

"Ace Boggus," said Millie sharply. "He went to help Lee with the new herd of shorthorn stock."

"He's punched his last cow." I said. "At least until the Judgement Day comes to New Mexico." Then I told them about the meeting in the hotel room in Vaughn, and the death stakeout at the waterhole.

"It doesn't make sense," rumbled old man Withers, gnawing at his moustache and caressing his stump. "Ace has been with us for better than four years."

"He may have been drawin' Dot N' Dash pay but he was working for somebody else. Somebody sicked him on me."

"That could explain a lot of funny tricks." The oldster cleared his throat. He seemed to have forgotten Robbins. "Boggus has a brother who rides for Jonson."

Robbins put on his hat. "I reckon I'll be pushing along." He looked at the old man. "You think over this new offer, Joe."

The minute he had passed out of sight, Millie said to the old man: "Offer? What did he want?"

"About the ranch. Same ol' thing. Withers turned to me. "My old puncher is right nice. Jonson figures to crowd me down, and Robbins figures to buy. They make a good combination. Somebody chews out part of my stock, then Jonson moves in on my grass. Everytime he bites off a chunk, Robbins lowers his price. Soon the best spread in New Mexico won't be worth a coyote's hide." Withers had bitter lines in his face. He looked tired and old.

"Why don't you put a stop to Jonson." I wanted to help this oldster who had known the young west of Indians and buffaloes. "Push right back. Holler for help. Get the Association down here. A big spread like this pays big dues."

"In the old days—" The old man broke off, then began again. "In the old days—but them times is gone. I'm an old man now, besides my boy ain't here. Yessir, Jonson with Ike kilt, and one thing, and another—" His voice dwindled away.

"What about the shooting of this Ike Jonson," I said. "Lee told me some, but I'd like to know the whole story."

"Sure, Parker, sure," The old man dropped in the armchair. "You got to know how the land lies. Millie, how about a glass of brandy around?"

When the girl had gone, Withers leaned toward me. "Don't like to talk about all this killin' and runnin' off in front of Millie. Tain't good for her, and she might get the notion that I'm blaming her some. You see, this nogood Ike, he was mighty struck on Millie. It was natural. All the men in this part of the country are." The old man glanced up at me, his fierce eyes proud and apologetic at the same time. "Rumors got started about this feller and my gal. Millie was supposed to be sneakin' out nights to him. Some people got the notion that him and my boy quarreled on 'count of Millie. They had a fallin' out but it had nothin' to do with Millie."

"Parker, you wait 'til you see my boy. He ain't quite as big as you, but he's a scrapper and a fine 'un." Real pride was in the old man's voice this time. "Yessir,

I been afigurin' for her and my boy to marry when they get twenty-one. But they're twenty-one now, and Little Joe is a long ways away."

I pulled the old man back from that faraway tone. "Aside from the quarrel was there any reason that your boy was suspected of the killing?"

"His gun," he said. "I had a pair of .38's on .45 frames in the old days. I gave one to Millie, and one to Little Joe. When they found Ike in the Cryin' Valley line camp, he had .38 slugs all through him. His face was almost shot off. I never saw the like. We could hardly identify him . . . . . That was one reason I knew my boy was clear. Only someone in a nervous, scared fit could have done it and Little Joe is good and solid."

THE oldster went on to tell me all about the killing and the line camp where the body had been found. It was a cabin between the Dot N' Dash and the Halfmoon. He told me frankly that unless the boy could get back and take over the reins to the ranch it was going to seed. When he told me that he hadn't had any word from Little Joe in several months now, I perked up.

"You mean he wrote and sent messages?

"Oh yes," said the old rancher. "My boy and me is pretty close."

Withers droned on about conditions, Robbins, Jonson, and his son, until Millie came in with a tray. Then he stopped abruptly. I didn't mind much. I was thinking about the hombre with the whisper saying: "They'll find Mr. Parker with his handsome head shot right off."

"How do you figure to start," asked the old man, lifting his glass?

"Dunno. I might begin a check on the .38," I said. "Especially who was carrying one at the time Jonson was shot. A .38 isn't the most remarkable gun in the world. Quite a few people are partial to them."

"People are remembering that now." The oldster sighed. "That's why I figure my boy would have a chance to stand trial now. Even Truce Robbins carries a .38. There's several around."

"I'll start with that then."

"Then what?"

"That'll take awhile." I didn't know beyond that myself. There probably wasn't a thing to do but head for the badlands and the border.

"I reckon you ought to know," said Withers. He finished his brandy and stood up. "I'm turnin' in. There's a room all fixed for you, and you're free to come and go when you please. We'll all do all we can to help you. . . . Goodnight." He looked at the girl for a moment, then turned to the door.

When he was gone Millie went to the tray.

There was an extra glass. She drank it down like water. She stood there in front of the fireplace idily kicking the brass andirons. Finally she glanced around. Her face was hard and bitter.

"Why would Jonson do that," she said. "Why would he plant a spy on us?"

"You're sure it was him?"

"Who else would?"

"That answers the first question then, doesn't it? He's trying to crowd the Dot N' Dash down. Naturally, he would like somebody to pick up information. Like bunch locations, and when new stock is coming in."

"But why would he try to kill you?"

"Because he doesn't want Little Joe back. He doesn't want Little Joe back because he figures that it's easier to crowd an old man than a young one." I said it, but I didn't believe it.

"Maybe Little Joe won't come back." There was almost hope in Millie's voice.

I didn't know what to say to that.

"Maybe Little Joe is dead," said Millie. "Joe hasn't heard from him in a long, long time."

I still didn't say anything, and after a bit she came over to the divan beside me. She leaned back against the cushions, and stretched cat-like. The move accentuating the curves of her body.

"It's lousy, isn't it?"

I was careful. "You mean the drink? Or things in general?"

"Everything."

"I suppose so," I said. "But cheer up. You've still got this beautiful old ranch, and we'll get Little Joe back."

"Maybe I don't want him back," she said.

I thought that over for awhile. Then Millie took my glass away from me and slid into my lap. "Take me back to Vaughn with you," she said passionately.

That gave me two things to ponder about before I went to sleep. I was awake for a long time looking down at the heap of broken wagon wheels and old harness behind the blacksmith shop.

THE next morning, I geared the Palomino and rode Southwest. It was a pleasant ride. The grass was good, and there was plenty of water. In the head of almost every little Valley there was a spring. About noon I reached the beginning of the Sierritas and a stand of timber.

A mile further and I saw a one room log shack. "Must be the Cryin' Valley line camp where Little Joe was supposed to have shot the face off Ed Jonson's brother, Ike," I thought. "I think I'll look around." I went in easy for it looked deserted and lifeless.

The hombre in the open window was small. His eyes were slate-grey, and hard enough to nick a penknife blade. His gun was fastened on me like a leech. He motioned me off the Palomino and into the shake-roofed shack.

The gun followed every move I made, and I walked stiff and wary. "I don't have that much money," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. "What dinero I've got is not worth shootin' for." I kept talking, but I wanted him to talk. He had to be gotten through this cold craze if I was to have a chance. But he wouldn't say a word. I felt a sinking cold feeling in my stomach. My chances weren't worth a nickle.

"Go ahead you skunk, gut-shoot me," I grunted. "Or maybe you want me to turn my back?"

The hombre took a long breath at that, and he and I sighed together. I could see some of the lunacy go out of his face. His voice, though soft, had that awful tinge of death. "I want you just as you are, Parker. I want you facing me." I knew from the way he imitated the whisperer that he was his brother from the Halfmoon. "Yes, Mister Willard Parker, I want you to see it coming. Does your insides feel like a little bit of lead?"

"I'm ironclad," I said, then: "Dry-gulching must run in your family. You don't give a man anymore of a chance than your brother did."

For a minute I thought I put it too strong. The blood came up in his face, then his hands moved. "Blood in the Soft Hills," came to me in a lightning-like flash, and I knew that the time had come to make my bid. I ripped off my black felt and threw it at his face, diving to my left. I streaked my hand in my cross handed draw, and prayed as I jerked the gun upward. We were both shooting before I hit the cabin floor—the building rocking with the snarling boom boom—but we were both missing. I got my second shot away before he did and it whirled him back and down, and his gun fell limply from his hand. I scrambled over, got it, and tossed it through the window. Then I picked up my hat. There was a ragged hole through the crown.

The hombre groaned. I went to him. His left shoulder was smashed. Blood was soaking through his shirt.

IV

I BANDAGED up the wound as best I could, and though he was still groggy from shock, I carried him from the cabin and put him on his horse, roping him solid to the saddle. I held the Palomino up against his black mare, and walked them slowly. The trail was fairly even, wide, but dusty.

It was a long ride to the Halfmoon. Boggus was a bit delirious by the time we reached the ranch. The Halfmoon wasn't anything like the picture buildings and carpet lawn of the Dot N' Dash. Here was an ugly old ramshackle structure with its long, low bunkhouse by its side. Only the barns and the corrals looked well cared for. It was early evening here. All of the punchers were in and around the bunkhouse. When they saw why I was walking my horse beside the black mare, they came running. Several of them took Boggus,

carrying him into the bunkhouse and working over him. Then, most of them came back, and rimmed me in a semi-circle.

Jonson came out of the big house. He didn't have on his dude clothes today, and he looked more like a rancher in the old ones.

"I thought I told old man Withers to keep his punchers and hired guns off the Halfmoon," he said.

"You're talking to the wrong man, ranny," I said. "I'm neither a cowpoke nor a gunnie. You're going to call somebody someday and have to be there ahead of him."

Jonson didn't look very worried.

"I brought in Boggus's brother." I gently kneed the stallion sidewise, just in case. "That family's luck has done run out."

"What's this about Boggus?" Jonson asked. He sounded as if he didn't know what I meant.

"Both Boggus's are flat," I said. "One ranny has a hole in him, the other has a smashed shoulder. The last put a hole in my hat." I took off my hat, and stuck my finger through the bullet hole. "That's something the Halfmoon owes me for."

Then I pulled my big bluff, or maybe it was the surprise. For not a man said a word, nor lifted a finger as I rode away. They were just staring. I was quick to get the nearest barn between us.

I headed the big Palomino straight south, and while the moon was in full flower we left the Halfmoon range, and hit the trail to Summit. The land was not so good here, it had begun an upward grade, and there was plenty of bleeder canyons and gray sage.

Although it was fairly late, there was lights aplenty when I rode into town. I swept down the main street to the corrals and livery stable. I went past the lighted jail and that reminded me of something, and when I had seen to the horse, I went back to the Sheriff's office.

The Sheriff was a middle-aged little man with watery eyes. He reminded me of a bulldog. There was a young deputy in the room with him. The Sheriff spat in the general direction of the cuspidor as I walked in.

I unbuttoned my shirt and showed my shield. "It's unofficial," I said. "I'm working private."

"Set down, son," he said. "What can the Cuzco county law do for you?"

I gave my name and he perked up. Then I told him the whole story. Or most of it. It paid in the end I knew, to keep everything aboveboard. When I had finished, he spat again and was silent for awhile.

"If you're tellin' it right, Parker," he said, "there'll be no complaints from Boggus."

"There may be from Jonson."

"I doubt it." The little man sounded positive. "I think he'll let things ride when he thinks it over. However, if he does push it, I'll have to have you in for a hearing— if Boggus claims you threw down on him. But one man's word is as good as another, especially when he's an association man named Willard Parker."

"Thanks. But what about Jonson? He probably sent this Boggus to gun me down."

Immediately, all of the easy kindliness left the Sheriff. His eyes lost their reumy look, and became sharp and impersonal. "You don't want to say that too often around here, son," he said slowly. "Jonson is a well liked man here in Summit, even if Truce Robbins and the town bank does have the Halfmoon staggering with mortgages. It doesn't make sense to me why he would want you downed, and it wouldn't make sense to anybody else around here. . . . Nope, Ed Jonson would be a fine hombre—dumb, but nice— if he wasn't trying to pay up for that nogood brother of his that was killed."

It made sense to me, but somehow I too felt that Jonson was honest. And there is a certain contradiction between dry-gulching and honesty.

I didn't rush to speak, just waited for the Sheriff to try for the cuspidor again and relax. When he did, I asked him who had been toting .38's when Ike Jonson was shot?

"Nothing there," said the sheriff. "I tried to hit a pay-streak from that angle too. Half a dozen people around here— beginning with Truce Robbins and ending with Billy here— carry them horned-toad shooters. Anyone of them coulda done the

killin' too, but danged if anyone had a motive."

"Do you think Little Joe had a motive?"

"If I don't that's private business. As a Sheriff I can't afford opinions. You know that. But I will say no court on earth could ever convict him, though I'm pretty sure Little Joe saved hisself from a necktie party by riding South."

"Well, thanks, Sheriff," I said. "I guess I'll try a check on those .38's anyway." I half rose.

"You're welcome," he said. "In fact, you can start right here with my deputy. I never did trust that fancy hardware."

I built a smoke while the youngster leaned forward, not sure what was to come. I looked at him out of the corner of my eye. He was a typical cow country youth, quiet faced and serious.

The Sheriff spat at the cuspidor and grinned. "How do you suppose the big bandit made out?" he said slyly.

I went along with the joke. "Well," I said. "He just stood there with that no-good .38 in his fist, and this Sheriff, who was no sport, walked right up to him, put a .45 to his head, and scattered his brains over four counties."

"Hah," said the Sheriff haughtily. "I knew it. Them durn fancy guns."

The young deputy stood up, hitched up his holster, gave us a sour look and stalked from the office.

"Some folks is touchy on the subject of their artillery," said the Sheriff. He spat out his cud, cut some new tobacco off a twist, and leaned toward me. "Parker, if I had this job you've saddled yourself with, here's how I'd begin—"

WILSHIRES' combination saloon and bawdy-house was full of night sounds. They were sounds of revelry, and the soft laughter of the girls. It was a sumptuous place. Truce Robbins was dealing Faro at one of the tables, and he waved a hand as I strolled past towards the bar. I was again struck by how little he resembled a gambler. I lined up at the bar for a whiskey. Over the mirror was the usual nude lady. She looked padded to me, pumped up, as though she had been blown up like a balloon. I had never seen anything like the picture in real life, and I knew that I never would. However, I was looking her over when Robbins joined me.

"Have a drink on the house," he invited.

"Fine," I said. "But first I want to ask you a question or two. Then we'll see if you're still free with your whiskey."

"Fair enough," the gambler smiled. "Shoot?"

I gauged my voice to carry over the laughter of two wild-eyed rannies. "Did you tell Jonson's crew about my trouble at Sleton's spring?"

"Why yes. Yes, I believe that I did." Robbins smile was broad. "I passed by there after I left the Dot N' Dash. Sorta passed the good word along."

"Perhaps you don't know it but your good word almost got me a .45 slug in the belly. The whisperin' hombre at the waterhole had a relative at the Halfmoon."

"Shooting people is not the best way to make friends." Then Robbins bantering tone faded. "You're a grown man, Parker, and therefore responsible for your own actions."

I scuffed my feet in the sawdust. "All right, feller, we'll play it that way. Don't guess there's any way to prove that you might be in the thick of this. Say, you and Jonson."

"Don't be like that, Parker—" again I wondered where I had heard a similar expression— "I'm waiting for Jonson to go down for the third time. I've got a pile of money down on the Halfmoon. Most of it is through the town bank, but people forget that I own the bank. If and when Jonson breaks I'm due to clean up. If Ed, or anyone else for that matter, was in hell and in the fiery furnace I wouldn't give them a pint of salt water."

Robbins was talkin' straight on this last I was sure.

"How about the Dot N' Dash?"

"The Halfmoon will be plenty," said Robbins, openly and frankly as though he had nothing to hide. "Besides I got other ideas there. I'm not feuding with ol' man Withers. I'll buy if I can, but if not—" Robbins shrugged. "Yep, the Halfmoon is plenty big enough, and I think you can see that I'm interested in Millie?"

I could but— "If what you say is true—"

The gambler cut me off. "You were going to say that if it's true, then I wouldn't want Little Joe back, and that gives me a reason for putting the Boggus boys on you."

"Right." I looked at swinging lamps.

"It does sound good— and there's the fact that I hate the old man for firing me, although he did me a dandy turn— but there's one detail that's as far off as Creepin' creek. I never send nobody to pull my iron. When I want you downed I'll grab for my leather myself."

The way Robbins said it, without batting an eye, his piece was good. I didn't know exactly what to say next and was sorting out something, when Ed Jonson comes storming into the saloon like a hungry cougar. He sent the batwing doors arockin'.

"Truce," he yelled, looking right through me. "I want to talk to you right away."

He was sure on edge about something.

"Talk away," said the gambler.

"In private, right now," demanded the big man.

"I'm a popular man tonight," muttered Truce, but he motioned Jonson down the bar. They went into a little back room. I heard Jonson begin in a hard angry voice: "Truce, damn you, there's something that you know that I want to know—" then the door slammed shut, and I could only hear a mumble.

For a man whose place was mortgaged to the hilt, Jonson seemed to have a lot of gall with his creditors. Or maybe he didn't care or had stumbled onto something of importance.

I stayed around Summit for two days and during that time I checked on all of the .38's but two, Millie's and Little Joe's. I also had the stallion reshod, and consumed quite a bit of Truce's liquid goods. But somehow I was glad to leave the cowtown, not that there was anything above the surface, but it seemed hard and blood hungry.

AGAIN night found me just about to dismount, and this time I was physically uncomfortable, for with the darkness had come slow steady drizzle of rain. Cowhands like to see it rain, but they hate to be out in it. It makes leather soft and slick, easily cut and torn, and it gets powder wet.

I was back in Cryin' Valley at the line camp. I figured to spend the night there. At least it would beat sleepin' out. Too, I wanted to give the cabin and its surroundings a good onceover.

Staking the Palomino under the pines, I carried my gear to the shack. The door was closed. It was dark. When I opened the door I got the smell and for a moment half decided to sleep out anyway. I could run me up a little brush shelter. But the thought of fumbling around among the brush and rocks wasn't pleasant. It was chilly as well as wet, and that is what decided me. I pitched myself inside and went to the lean-to at the back. There I found a stack of cut wood and some shavings. I carried in an arm-load and started a fire.

While still on my knees before the firepot, I began to get the smell of something terrible. It didn't have the same smell as before, and it wasn't just the usual smell of a damp, boardup place—it was something different. Something clinging and sweetish. It hung in the air like something you could touch. It seemed that I'd smelled the smell many times before—and that I should know it.

I got the first piece of pitchpine blazing, then, suddenly, I knew what the odor was. It was the smell of a morgue. It was the naked smell of death.

I sat very still, waiting, hearing the tiny spit of the flame on the wood. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw huge, ghost-like shadows dance around the room to the growing light. They grew more macabre, but smaller as the fire took hold. My palms were sweating freely, and I felt eyes boring into my back.

"Get out of the light," I thought. I clambered to my feet, spur rowels jingling loudly. I tried to appear as casual as I could. Nothing happened. Nothing happened when I took a cautious step out of the firelight, or when I jumped hastily for the shadows back of the crude fireplace. I landed facing the room with the gun

jutting in my hand, then I saw the cause of my fear.

He was sitting on the floor across from me, his head against the corner of the pole bunk. He was looking straight into darkness. The man in the brown coat would always be looking into darkness for he was stone dead.

Jonson had the look of an overgrown kid with his features relaxed in death. I holstered my gun and walked over to him. The gun was between the body and the door and I picked it up. The killer must have tossed it there after a hasty job. Or perhaps someone had surprised or frightened him.

It was a fancy gun. A .44 with a carved bone handle. I saw with surprise that it was Jonson's own gun. A neat half moon was carved on one side, and the initials E J were on the other. It had only been fired once.

I was still examining the gun, when I heard the Palomino snorting and stamping outside. There was a faint sound, gradually growing stronger. I waited, feeling my nerves jumping. To be caught with a dead man, and even with the gun in my hand. Then quickly the sound of the hooves stopped. Had I merely dreamed them up? I listened, but there was nothing, just the rain hammering gently on the roof, and the whispering rustle of the pines without.

Hurriedly, I went to the fireplace and stamped out my fire. Then I stood in the dark by the door, muscles tense. With most of the light gone, I felt considerably better. I was as silent as a rattler in the water for about an hour, but there was still no sound from without. Slowly, I eased the door back and moved out, crouching against the cabin wall. The rain was cool on my face and the soft, damp earth under my feet made no sound at all. I slid down one wall and around the corner. Only the soft sighing of the breeze thru the pines could be heard. Otherwise the silence was empty and dead.

When I reached the next corner I stopped for a moment, and turned. Then, I took another step forward— and I exploded like an oak puff ball in a furnace. Then stygian black.

WHEN I came out, I was lying right where I stopped in the dark. It was still raining, and the pines still were swaying and breathing softly. I was lying just at the edge of the shack, where the water could run off the roof. My clothes were sodden, and my face felt cold to my exploring fingers. I fumbled for my holster, but my gun was still there. I clambered to my feet, using the cabin wall for support. Then my head began to feel as though it had been split with an axe, filled with red-hot coals, and sewed back together roughly so that the two halves ground and clashed. My mouth was dry and filled with dirt. I found that I was holding something tightly clutched in my left hand. It felt small, like a coin, and I wondered where it had come from. For almost a full minute I held it up, trying foolishly to pierce the dark. Then, when I got enough savvy to realize that I couldn't see in the dark, I put it in my vest pocket.

Somewhere off in the night I could hear the stamping of a horse— in fact, it sounded like several horses— but to my befuddled brain it sounded like one. Holding to the rough log wall, I started to investigate. I pulled out my gun and breathed a prayer for just one shot at the hombre who had sent me to the mud. As I rounded the corner I heard the mumble of a voice, and the bright jingle of spurs. The door was partly ajar and in the glow of a new fire, I saw movement. Kicking the door open, I staggered in.

"Get your hands high, you damn killer," I yelled.

Almost as I stepped through the door, for the second time, something thudded against the back of my skull. It knocked me to the floor, and I lost my gun. Dazed and hurt by this second blow, I started to one knee. Then it seemed that a herd of big Mexican brindles jumped on me, and stampeded right over me. One of them started kicking me like an old dun mule. Then— I went into that awesome black pit again.

It was hours later when I swam back into the light of reasoning. I was on a bed, in a lighted room, and my hands were tied tight. A line of wreathy smoke was swaying over me, and there were tiers of

bunks against the wall. It was a bunkhouse somewhere. It looked strangely familiar. Like the Dot N' Dash bunkhouse.

There was the sound of rhythmic breathing behind me.

Very carefully I turned my head, skyrockets and falling stars began to cartwheel in my skull. I waited for them to slow down, then turned a little more, and looked right into the watery blue eyes of the Sheriff from Summit.

"How you feelin', son?" he asked.

"Fine and dandy," I managed painfully. "What happened when I got caught in the cave-in?"

The Sheriff chuckled. "The boys was a bit rough. But you looked mighty desperate. Hair aflyin', drippin' water, and hollerin' with no words."

"Rough? Is that what you call it? I thought they was crownin' me queen of the rodeo."

The Sheriff looked away. "I don't think you can blame them. I told you that Ed Jonson had a lot of friends in these parts."

His words brought back that last scene at the line camp a little clearer. "Why did you hombres decide to take it out on me?" That part wasn't clear. "And why am I all wrapped up here like a locoed steer?"

"Son, don't try so hard," said the Sheriff. "Ed Jonson had been missing since the night of our little talk— last seen in Wilshire's— this evening a Dot N' Dash puncher brings in the news that he's found Ed in the ol' Cryin' Valley line camp, and dead. We gathered up a posse and went right out. Then you dropped in, lookin' like a fiend with your gun in your hand, and spoutin' gibberish. The boys jumped you from all sides. I had a mighty hard time talking them out of stringin' you to the nearest tree." The little man paused, spat, and chuckled. "I told them a durn lie. I showed them your shield and told them that it was 'official'. I figured to bring you out here at the Dot N' Dash 'til things quiet down a bit. Them townfolks, they seem to need a little fun like a lynchin' every now and then."

"Like when Ike Jonson was shot?"

"Yessir," he said. "Just like when Ike was killed."

"Do you really figure that I shot Ed?"

The Sheriff spat. "I don't like it, but it'll be up to the jury."

"I hope that you weren't too busy to notice that Jonson had been dead at least twenty four hours before you found him."

"Nope, I noticed." The Sheriff's voice was cold, and I knew that he had been a particular friend of Jonson's.

"You surely don't think I'd shoot him, ride off, then ride my bronc back just for curiosity, do you?"

"I told you, Parker, that I don't opinionate. But I can't figure it. You're too smart, unless you forgot something. Or maybe you came back to bury Ed? You put Ace Boggus in a neat six-foot grave."

"Wouldn't it have been smarter to have buried him right after I'd put a hole in his chest?" He didn't answer and I started again. "If you had've gotten there earlier you might have found a somebody else."

"Who, son?"

I told him about my finding the body and hearing the sound of a horse on the trail, of my going outside to investigate, and getting clouted into oblivion. "That accounts for my clothes, and wet hair," I said. But he just sat there looking skeptical.

"I've got a knot on my head to prove it," I said.

The Sheriff shook his head. "Parker, you've got enough lumps on your head to prove seven stories."

"All right then, I can't prove anything. But look at the way Jonson was shot. It had to be someone he trusted. A man just doesn't let just anybody walk up, steal his own iron, and shoot him with it."

"Who says he was shot with his own gun?" The Sheriff was sharp.

"Nobody, but it wasn't in his holster was it?"

"Someone could have gotten the drop, and lifted his gun." The Sheriff's interest had lessened.

"But the iron was there, with one shot fired. That's a pretty good indication that he was shot with his own gun, isn't it? And if he was shot with his own gun, it would have to be like I said— someone he trusted. That wouldn't be me, would it?"

"It doesn't sound pretty good." The

Sheriff's grin was wide. "However, there's just one flaw."

"What's that?"

"We'd need Ed's iron, wouldn't we. To see that it had been fired."

"It was right there. Right by the fire-pot. Didn't you get it?"

"Son, it's things like that that make the big weakness in your story. I went all over that shack, even sifted the ashes, there just wasn't any kind of a gun there."

I began to glimpse an answer now. "Who was with you?"

"Whole bunch," he said. "Most of Wilshire's saloon."

Then the Sheriff left me and blew out the lamp. Lying there in the dark, I realized what a fine mess I had gotten in to.

"I'll sure hate to call to the Association like a snivelin' coyote," I thought. But I didn't see any other way.

With my head hammering like a woodpecker on an oak post, I got off the bed and made it to the window. In the faint light from one of the ranch house lamps, I saw what was in my vest pocket. It was a shiny silver concho, the size of one of the new dimes.

It winked at me in the weak light, and I held it a long, long time looking at it and thinking. That little bit of tooled silver seemed to tell me a lot. It seemed to be a part of the puzzle that I didn't have, but that if I had, the rest would fall into place.

I felt kinda sick inside about my thoughts. For Lee's clothes were studded with these Mexican ornaments.

V

THE BUNKHOUSE door creaked open, and I leaned forward expecting the Sheriff, however instead of the smell of horses and leather, the fragrance of perfume came to me, plus a faint whisper. It was a woman's voice. Millie.

"What the—" I started.

She put her hand over my mouth and drew my head toward her. I could feel the softness and warmth from her body.

"You all right?" she asked softly.

"Except for a throbbing in my head and a few knots, I'm fine." I started to be sarcastic, then changed my mind.

"You've got to get out of here," she whispered. "They'll lynch you if you stay. A bunch from town is comin'."

"It doesn't seem like I'll be able to do much about it," I said. "They got me nicely sewed up."

I saw the faint sheen of a long knife, then I felt her hands on my wrist. She sawed, and half a second later I was free.

"Will you leave the Soft Hills?" she asked.

I flexed my wrists. "There's still the guards."

"One of them is Lee. He's out front. I'll get the other one away." She gave a confident little laugh. I knew she would.

"How can I square this, Millie? You're doing an awful lot. If this gets around I don't think that you'll be popular."

Millie hugged me to her fiercely. "Get clear," she said. "Then wait for me in Vaughn." But even as she said it I knew that she didn't mean it.

Lee was waiting for me when I slithered out the door behind Millie. "Here's your gun. Your horse is in the first barn beyond the corral. Nobody's out there now. Grab him. . . . In a couple of minutes I'll have to raise a ruckus, hollerin' that you've escaped. Go straight down the trail. See you in Vaughn sometime."

I considered the gun in my hand. "I'm going up the trail," I whispered. "I'll be at the line cabin, waitin." I looked down. but it was too dark to see his chaps. I didn't want to think it, but—

Lee whispered oaths. "You damfool, you. They'll nail your hide to that cabin cornerpole." I didn't wait for anymore.

The Palomino was up on the ridge when I heard the sound of window-glass smashing, and Lee's yelling from the Bunkhouse. "He's a mighty good actor," I thought, but my thoughts were far from the pantomine that the brownfaced puncher was doing, and my thoughts were grim.

I put the horse into a vicious time-killing gallop, and we left the ranch building's like a fast freight, winging like an arrow from a bow. I headed straight for the cabin, I knew that the posse would be

fooled and head into the desert. When I hit the rock outcrop, I did cut into a short circle and dropped an empty saddle bag for a sign, then I headed for the jackpines.

After a short, quick ride, I reached the camp. Its shake-shingled roof was frosted ghostly with twilight. I staked the Palomino out in the trees and tied down his tongue so that he wouldn't sound off when another horse came near. Then I went down to the cabin. The ground around it had a mat of pine needles.

It was lonely- seeming in the little shack. Of course, the corpse of Jonson was gone now. "No more will the Soft Hills hear his bluster," I thought. I brought me in another stack of wood, built me another fire, put on a tin bucket of water for a spot of coffee, and sat down to wait. I sat with my back to the door, took my gun out and hitched my belt around so that no one could see that my holster was empty. Then I crossed my arms with the .45 in my right hand and under my vest. I preferred the .45 to the little hideout. It was more accurate.

The coffee simmered and that helped to drive away the smell of death, but the thought remained. I thought of everything that had happened since I had come to the Soft Hills— though things had been boiling softly for a long time— but I couldn't help from thinking that this range had the look of a cowman's paradise.

I had been sitting there for about an hour when I heard the tiny whisper of bootheels on the pine needles, and I knew that this was what I had been waiting for. "Come on in Lee." I called. "Come right in? I know that you're not the back-shootin' kind."

There was no sound behind me, and I could feel my muscles growing tight. "Maybe I've guessed wrong." I thought. "Maybe there'll be more blood for the Soft Hills tonight. Mine."

I didn't want to have to kill or be killed with Lee. I just wanted to get the drop on him. He had to talk and explain what he knew about the trouble and the silver concho. Silently, I eased back the hammer on the .45, turning my head at the same time.

The figure in the door had his gun out, and the black opening of a gun barrel stared right back at me. The gun claimed my attention for a moment, then I looked up at the man leaning nonchalantly against the door jamb. Surprise almost caused me to drop the hammered .45. "You're losin' your grip, Parker," I thought.

The hombre was a total stranger.

He had on a tight charro jacket with little silver conchos on the pocket flaps. One of the conchos on the right was conspicuously absent. He wore a wide brimmed Mexican sombrero, and tight waisted peon trousers. However, the face of the stranger didn't go with the Mexican clothes. It wasn't the face of a Mexican at all. It was a youthful face, but the eyes were old. Hawk-sharp and ice-blue. There was also a neat roan moustache. I looked at it and a light began to rim the foolish darkness of my brain.

"I'm sorry, feller," I said. That seemed all I could say. I dropped my arm and eased down the hammer, returning the gun to my holster. "I was expecting a friend."

"Is that the way you meet your compadres? With a gun up your sleeve?" The voice was pleasant, and by it I knew that my deductions were right.

"I guess I did him an injustice," I said, and was feeling my words. I had done Lee an injustice. "I thought he put a knot on my head and set me up for a whole wagon-load of knots. I thought he left me this calling card—" I fished carefully in my pocket for the silver piece and flipped it toward him. He let it fall without taking his eyes off me.

"Perhaps, hombre," he said slowly. "You should give me some talk. Especially about yourself."

"Sure," I said willingly. "I'm Willard Parker, Investigator for the Cattlemen's Association. Glad to know you Mister Little Joe Withers."

"WHAT made you ride this way?" I asked. We had been talking for most of an hour, or that is, I had. He had finally holstered his gun, and I was glad, for this young man looked competent. He took some coffee, and listened attentively while I brought him up to date.

"Kinda got worried about the old man

and the ranch. I began to think that maybe things wasn't going so good, looks like I was right. Couldn't very well say that I was on the way, could I?" The young man nodded his head. "Sure am tickled to hear that it'll be all right for me to go home. . . . Say——" he looked at me. "I was the one that found Ed's corpse, and I smacked you down figuring to question you. However, before I got a chance that whole posse came riding in."

"They was all set to string me to a tree, but the Summit Sheriff talked them out of it." I scratched my ear. "We're both in a pretty rough hole, especially you. For when the posse finds you they'll figured that you burned this Jonson, too." It was on an after thought that I added. "Don't guess that you've got an idea who's behind this ruckus?"

"Is that so hard? I thought you was a lawman." Little Joe stared questionably.

"Association," I said. "Horse thieves and rustlers."

"Well," Little Joe pushed back his sombrero and squatted on his heels. "Cut out your friend Lee, the feller you thought sold you out. Jonson is out now, too. So who does that leave?"

"It looks plumb good," I nodded. "But there isn't a shred of proof. Did Robbins shoot Ike Jonson?"

"No," Little Joe was definite. "Not Truce Robbins."

"Do you know who did the killing?"

"Oh, yes," said Little Joe, choosing his words. "I know all right. But that one Truce didn't do."

"Then everything's fine," I said. "At least one of us knows."

Little Joe looked me squarely in the eyes. His face was set like a wooden carving, and ice-cold. "We've got to make an end to things. . . . I've got to face Truce Robbins, then to Millie, and the ranch."

It was a hard thing to do, but I talked him into staying the night out at the line shack. Just before we rolled our bedrolls on the floor, he said: "I'm gettin' Dad to tear down this old shack. It's no good, and there are too many memories."

Early the next morning, just as we was ready to leave, I saw dust and rider cuttin' up the trail from the direction of the Half-moon. I mentioned it, and Little Joe went to his pack. He came back with a pair of field glasses. He took a look through them, grunted satisfied-like, and handed them to me. I focused them—It was Truce Robbins. His bay horse looked like it was beat to the hocks. The gambler was laying on the whip and I could see lather flyin'. Robbins must have gone with the posse after me, then cut away to the line camp. Idly, I swung the glasses to cover the horizon. I could see the Dot N' Dash buildings in the distance, tiny and tipped with the morning sun. A horse was moving down there, too, and there seemed something familiar about the rider.

I adjusted the glasses, but when the tiny figures had cleared the buildings I knew that I didn't need them. It was another surprise.

"It's Millie," I said, and returned the glasses to him. "Isn't it?"

"Yes," said Little Joe grimly. "It's Millie."

He turned to look back at the gambler, then he spoke. "And that's how I guessed it," he said.

We went behind the shack, up a few feet to the head of the Valley. It was a good spot to look down from. We took shelter behind a big boulder and waited. We waited a long time, and I watched a buzzard wheeling in majestic circles over us. It seemed an ominous sign. I was itching to roll a smoke but I knew that I couldn't. It wasn't a smoke that I wanted anyway.

Truce got to the cabin first. We could hear his horse wheezing, then the jingle of metal and the creak of leather as he dismounted. Then came the bitter fragrance of burning tobacco. He just about had time to finish the smoke when Millie rode in.

We both peeped around the edge of the rock as the girl slid man-like from the saddle. Truce didn't give her much time to get set. He began before she was hardly upon the ground, and they didn't go into the cabin. "Damn it to hell," he began. "They didn't get Parker. I don't figure he left the Soft Hills, so he must be hiding out somewhere."

"He must have left," said Millie. "He'd be a fool not to."

Robbins ripped out an oath. "He's a fool all right, but a bulldog kind of a fool. But even his kind can't cut himself loose when he doesn't have a pocketknife." The gambler said the words like he was biting off lengths of barbed wire, chewing them, then spitting them at her.

"What do you mean," the girl asked softly. But we knew that now she was afraid of the trim figure before her.

"Somebody let Parker get away. Somebody with a knife. Who would that somebody be?"

"Maybe Lee——" suggested Millie. She still had control.

"Might be," agreed Truce hollowly. "Lee was his friend. However, I know Lee, and with the goods on Parker like last night, he wouldn't have stuck up a finger, unless—unless you rolled your eyes. You have a hellova way with men, don't you Millie?"

Millie was silent for a moment, then she burst loose, and the cabin echoed her angry, scared, but reckless tone. "Yes, by heck. Yes, I let him go. I'm sick of all the lyin' and double dealin' and killin'. Yes, I let that Association man go. Now, damn your hide. What are you going to do about it?"

The gambler began to curse her. "You're forgetting something, woman, aren't you. You're forgetting that I know something about you——"

"I'm forgetting nothing," said Millie. "Why do you think I've honeyed up to you all these years. Because I loved you?" Millie laughed cuttingly as only a woman can laugh at a man. "But now we're even steven. I know that you killed Ed."

It was the experience I guess, but I didn't have to look down to know that this was it. Millie had taunted him raw. He was blind with rage. The western code didn't go any longer. Millie wasn't a woman now. She was just something in his path.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Little Joe start up. While he was still off balance I said, "He's mine," and pushed him back. Then I drew. Truce saw me immediately and swung his gun. I started to shout to the girl to run for the cabin, but it was too late. She ran in on him courageously, trying to give me cover. With no thought of herself. She even tried to snatch his .38 to keep him from firing. However, he got the slug away. I heard the crack, a bit muffled because her body was between.

Then she crumpled, and there was nothing in between. Robbins face was horrible. Both triumph and sorrow were fighting for the upper hand.

I STOOD stock-still, rested my barrel on my forearm and sighted. The gambler had to be taken alive, he had to talk, but I knew that I must hurry to the fallen girl.

Robbins even got in a snap shot at me while I was aiming, but it sung past my ear. Then I squeezed the trigger. It smashed into his shoulder, causing the .38 to be ripped violently from his hand. He sat down, blood dripping from his clutching hands.

Both Little Joe and I rushed down the slope to the girl. But I knew that our run was useless. Millie was dead. She probably hadn't even known what had struck her. She was relaxed. No longer did her face look hard and wanton. She looked like a little girl, and I seemed to hear her say: "Take me to Vaughn," and, "I want to go to 'Frisco." Millie wasn't minding the dust which was kicked up by the frightened horses, not minding that it was drifting down into that ash-blond hair. Her wild burro eyes were closed. Forever closed.

Little Joe looked down and then turned away. A hard muscle ridged in his jaw and he swallowed noisily. "Well, I guess it was just as well this way," he said. He removed his hat and kept his voice soft and even, but I knew that he was hurt.

We stood like that for a long time. Two hatless men, and a seated wildeyed one, by the stiffening corpse of a woman. The sun was hot, and the buzzard swept over the pines in everlowering circles.

As it turned out my aim had been good, but too good for that high-stringing Summit bunch. The gambler lived just thirty-four hours after we got him down to the ranch in a buckboard. My slug had touched a lung. However, Robbins lived

long enough to give us the whole tale. It was a sordid story of grasping greed and twisted hate, but through it ran a love that was genuine. Truce knew that he was cashing his chips for the last time so he didn't mind, especially now that Millie—

"Do you believe in a gambler's after life, Parker," Truce asked me just before he died, and I almost liked the little man for what he said next. "If there is one I'll get to see Millie."

His tale was simple, but it had nothing but trouble and heartache in it.

Kindness had started it off. If old Joe Withers had taken Millie out and fed her to a mountain lion, instead of adopting her, the story wouldn't even have happened.

At least the Soft Hills wouldn't have been so bloody. But because the grizzled old rancher was a good, kind man—and one who liked to have his own way—he had adopted her, and shaped her for his son's wife. However, neither of the kids wanted that marriage. They had grown up too much like brother and sister.

The Dot N' Dash, though a real range-land paradise to an old cowhand like me, was a kind of a jail to the girl. And it was natural that she should want to see things, other women, and have women's clothes. Too, she was normal and as she became older, she began to seek an outlet in men. A woman like that in the woman-hungry west. It was just like gettin' drunk, I reckon.

Both Little Joe and Truce Robbins had known that it was Millie who had shot Ike Jonson. It was because of Millie that Little Joe had been so ready to head his horse for the border. He couldn't afford to have Millie connected with it. It would have hit the old widower pretty hard.

Once Little Joe had dropped the reins to the Dot N' Dash, Truce Robbins began to dream of a Cattleman's empire in the Soft Hills. He wanted both the Dot N' Dash and the Halfmoon. Also he wanted to satisfy his hatred for having been fired by old Joe. The gambler had Millie to spy on the Dot N' Dash— she didn't care for the ranch anyway— and he promised her the moon. However, he got caught in his own trap. He fell in love with her. I found out—also too late—that Ace Boggus was his pard. In fact they were known as Ace and Deuce.

Truce made one big mistake the night he shot Ed Jonson—leaving the carved-butted iron. But he cleared that up by picking it up right under the nose of the Summit Sheriff.

"You know, son," said the grinning badge toter. "I always believed that story of yours."

"Yeah," I said, taking out my sack of Golden Grain from my vest. "I know you did."

When Truce made his confession only the Sheriff, Little Joe and I heard it. And when we told it to the old rancher we skimmed over Millie's big part, all but her death. Even though we eased it, I felt sorry for him. He took it hard.

That was how we slid the band on the tally book. Our guns no longer poured smoke and flame. They were silent and clean in their holsters. Although the old rancher went down visibly under Millie's death, he had his son back, and I never knew a finer young ranny than Little Joe Withers. He was everything a man could want in another man, tall, lean hipped, and broad shouldered. A man's man, and a scrapper, too.

I think Lee Hanley must have got some inside information— he left the Dot N' Dash even before I did. I was sort of glad he did because I felt ashamed of the silver concho deal, and my suspicions.

Little Joe rode out along the trail with me when I started out. He leaned across the saddle and we shook hands. "I'm comin' back to the ranch someday," I promised, then added: "But never on my vacation."

The young man in the punchers garb sat his horse for a long time, stiff as a ramrod, as I reined the Palomino towards the desert. It was mid-morning and, as I looked back, he was framed against red sun and the green of the Soft Hills.

DRY DEATH

By RAY MASON

It was a year of drouth. No rain for eleven months. Cattle were cheap, but men were cheaper. So the smart operator moved in for the clean-up.

THE HEAT was a live, sucking force drying the skin on my back and slowing the horses to a plodding walk. I was glad when we left the desert floor and started climbing up into the Red Butte country.

"It won't be any better up there," Dad observed, and drew his blue neckerchief across his nose to stop the clouds of red dust that rose from the horses' hoofs.

"This is drouth year. They ain't had any rain for eleven months, and it's almost spring. Jest the time fer a smart cattle buyer to move in."

I pulled my neckerchief up too. Everyone said I looked and acted just like Dad as far as I could. They had named me after Uncle Steve, big and blond and strong, but I had failed them on all counts. If I weighed more than a hundred and thirty pounds when I grew up it would fool a lot of people. Dad was past forty but he seemed more like an older brother.

Dad raised the neckerchief from the bottom, trying to smooth out his long handle-bar mustache.

"In the cattle business you've got to be hard," he said. "Mean an' hard. Another man's trouble is to your advantage. These greasy-sack ranchers have their backs to the wall in normal times. Now they'll be goin' hungry an' howlin' fer money. We can pick up their slab-sided cows fer our own price—an' that's three an' a half a head." He patted the heavy money belt under his dusty shirt. "Yes sir. Three an' a half a head."

I thought of the long drive home. Of course a fifteen year old isn't supposed to question his father's judgment but it was almost two hundred miles to Mom and our Three Brothers range.

"Won't a lot of 'em die on the trail?" I asked him.

Pop snorted. "Longest drive without water is the first forty miles. If we cull 'em fine we'll make it. I learned cattle work drivin' from Texas to Abilene. Started as trail hand and was bossin' the herd 'fore I got there b'gosh."

I had heard of Dad's and my two uncle's five years on the trail lots of times.

They said it was a job that called for plenty of judgment, lots of nerve and a fast six-gun. The three of them had moved more cattle than any six drovers on the trail. Later they had settled in the same valley, branding separately, and were doing well.

Both of my uncles had eleven hundred more cows than Dad and they kept joking him about it. Their kidding was good natured but Dad hated it, and had saved his money. When he heard of the drouth in this country he drew it from the bank and told them he was going to catch up with 'em. He could just do it too if he could buy cattle for three and a half a head.

"All of my life," Pop said, "I've been the least one of my family. I've gave every one a break and I don't get nowhere. From now on we're gonna be right down hard an' mean."

He reached down and patted the dust-caked shoulder of his big black. "These hosses have been goin' steady. Let's give 'em the rest of our canteen water. Town's only a couple of hours away. We can git water there."

I LED THE way to the barber shop once we hit the village of Red Butte. The dust was a foot deep in the street and the town was dead under the heat wave. A bath sure felt good. I just soaked in the big round tub while Pop washed off like a duck, then got a shave and had his mustache trimmed. We had clean shirts and levis in the war bags and I felt clean and cool when at last we headed for the restaurant and saloon.

I followed Dad inside and bumped into him when he stopped short just inside the door. Pop was staring at a couple of fellows eating at a small table in the corner.

One was a good looking Redhead wearing a black town suit and a tied-down ivory-handled gun. The other was a long-nosed Swede.

"I've seen that fancy-dressed gent somewhere before," Dad said. "Can't remember where."

The two saw Dad staring and got up to leave. The Redhead put on his hat and kept his face turned but the big Swede smirked at us and left with a swagger.

"That big Swede's the fighting one," I told Pop. "He's got two guns."

Pop grinned. "He'd shoot quicker but that's cause he ain't got no sense. In a fight you'd wanta watch the Redhead. Wish I knew where I'd seen that Jasper 'afore."

We sat down and ordered beef steak and I noticed that, while the place was crowded, there was very little business. Most of the people were either cowboys out of jobs or poverty-stricken ranchers. The drouth had hit this country hard.

Pop finished eating and we went over near the bar.

"I'm buyin' cows, gents," Dad announced loudly. "Anybody interested?"

There was a complete silence in the room. Finally a grizzled old rancher in a frayed jacket spoke up. "Our stock's so hungry an' thirsty we're tailin' em up, mister. What's the catch?"

Pop lifted his shoulders, trying to look tall in the crowd. "I'm payin' three and a half a head an' takin' my pick."

The rancher answered hotly. "That's not money, stranger. You'd take our strongest breedin' stock an' leave us with only the dyin' culls."

I watched Pop look over the ragged crowd. He hesitated for a long time. Then he got hard. "I ain't changin' my price or arguin', if you need cash money let me know. I've got it."

The cattlemen turned away after awhile, gathering in small groups to talk. Pop leaned against the bar, sipping a beer like he wasn't interested.

Once the grizzled old man waved a calloused hand towards us. "Yuh couldn't make it jest a leetle mite higher, could yuh, stranger?"

I felt sorry for them as Dad shook his head without speaking.

There was more low talking, then the old cattleman turned towards Pop, his face drawn and bitter. "Head North and go four miles outta town, stranger, an' you'll come to the widder Jamison's place. She fired her cowboys 'cause she couldn't pay 'em an' she'll have to sell. Then, if it

don't rain today yuh can cull my herd an' I'll leave the country. About four hundred head you'll git. Twenty years work fer fourteen hundred dollars—" his voice trailed off and his shoulders slumped as he moved to the bar.

"Have a drink on me," Dad said but the old man shook his head. The bartender looked at Dad like he was a coyote and set the bottle out, refusing the old rancher's money. I figured he had spent plenty here when he was flush.

It looked like Dad had won but I didn't figure on the Redhead mixing in.

He had stood back at the end of the bar playing with a heavy gold watch chain that crossed his high-toned vest. His black coat hung open showing the gun in the fancy hand-carved holster. He moved away from the bar and I thought he was going to ease out the door. Then he suddenly stopped, turning towards Pop. Several tough looking cowpunchers stepped out of the crowd to back him up. The long-nosed Swede was with him as he worked around to my side.

The Redhead looked down on Dad with a dirty grin. "These men have worked hard for their ranches, Shorty," he said, "And I'm not allowing you to break them."

I held my breath as Dad's face turned white, but he never said a word.

"I own the Rainbow Valley," the Redhead went on like he was talkin' to a tramp, "An' I've got water and feed. I'll let these fellers pasture their stuff there for three dollars a month and I'll charge it 'til next shippin' time."

THE old rancher turned to the Redhead. "That's better'n you offered before, Dudley. The last time it was three dollars cash in advance."

"It's still too damn much," growled another. "Even a good steer will cost more than it will bring before fall. The bad ones will cost three times their worth. I suppose you'll want a mortgage on our places?"

"Of course," snapped Red. "But that's better than sellin' the good ones to this robber and lettin' the rest of 'em die. Of course if you put 'em in you'll have to leave 'em 'til Fall."

I saw Dad stiffen, and I kicked the long-nosed Swede in the shins as hard as I could. He bent over and howled and I tried a looping right to the face but it didn't amount to much. It was enough to draw the attention of the rest of them though and they never saw Pop as he hit Red.

He landed hard in the face, then twice in the belly, and smashed him again in the jaw. Red went down like a shot beef and by the time he had fallen clear Dad had his gun out and the hammer eared back.

"Easy, gents," he said. "Back up or go to reachin'. I've seen this big four-flusher somewhere before but I can't think where. When he wakes up, tell him if he wants to die quick to jest call me 'Shorty' again!" He glanced at the grizzled old rancher. "You'd jest be givin' your cattle away dealin' with this range hog. I'm goin' out to the widder Jamison's now. If any of the rest of yuh want money, look me up."

He was backin' to the door with me in the clear behind him when the old timer answered. "There ain't much choice of hogs, stranger, but I reckon you'll git 'em all right!"

"THREE and a half a head an' I cull 'em," Dad said, and I saw the widder freeze up. She had been radiant, like we were heaven sent before and Dad had been awful polite even if Mom was a better lookin' woman.

"Three and a half," she said. "Why the very idea!"

Pop was apologetic. "I'm sorry, Mam, but we have a long drive to make, some of them'll die an—" he saw that he wasn't gettin' anywhere and looked at me like he'd like to raise the price. I grinned and he turned back, firm. "Three an' a half it is."

"I will tail up the strong ones myself and let the others die first," the widder told Pop. "Your price is no more than hide-and-tallow money."

"That's right, Mam," Pop answered, "But if you need the money let me know. I'll be around for a few days."

I expected to head for town but Dad

turned into the hills when we left the ranch.

"No use settin' around waitin' fer 'em to come to it," he growled. "We'll ride up and see if Red has so much water in Rainbow Valley!"

The valley wasn't so far away but we done a lot of climbin' to get there. We stopped on a ridge and I looked down and it seemed strange that such a swell place could be just above so much rotten land. There was not a cow in sight but the grass was deep, and it was good feed in spite of being kinda dried out. There was a little creek running down the valley and the grass along it's banks was green and deep.

"Those live-lookin' spots scattered around is springs," said Pop. "Plenty of water."

At first I could see no buildings but I finally made out the corner of a house setting 'way back under the ledge at the end of the valley. There was a little barn there too with a corral but somehow it didn't look like a cattle ranch.

"Rustlers' layout," said Dad. "Red settled here to brand his neighbor's cattle, then run 'em through that pass. Rustlin' ain't so good in a drouth year, but when this water business came along he knew he had somethin'. Let's ride on down."

Dad looked around and found the barb-wire fence just under the rim. He headed for the gate. He pulled his gun and stuck it between the saddle and his left leg, then he leaned forward a little so he could keep his hand on it without being seen. "Ride close behind me," he said, "and act like we don't suspect nothin'."

I tried but I kept gettin' further and further behind. Then I thought maybe someone might be in the brush behind us and I caught up.

We were just inside the fence when Dad saw a man nearly a quarter of a mile away. The fellow was looking us over with a spy glass and searching out the country behind us. "They're afraid the ranchers 'll try to move in," said Dad. "We'll be all right if he knows we're alone." The fellow was still looking at our back trail when we pulled up at the house.

Red came out with a carbine in his hand. He was followed by the Swede that I had kicked in the shins and I was glad to see Pop's gun-hand out of sight in his lap.

Dudley, the red-head, looked like a cat lickin' up cream. "Well, if it ain't the little cattle buyer and his cub come to finish the argument!"

He started to bring the rifle up, then stopped. Pop shook his head.

"Nope. Came to make a deal."

Pop had hit him so hard on the bridge of the nose that both of his eyes were black and he fingered them gently as he started to speak again. "Hell! I wouldn't——" then he stopped and got crafty. "A deal, huh? Maybe I will," he said. "Maybe I will."

"I'll buy their cows," Dad says, "And feed 'em up here awhile before I leave. I'll pay you cash in advance fer pasturage an' we'll both make some money."

You could see Dudley's mind a-workin', "I'll take that," he said finally. "Swede, let go of that gun! Can't you see he's got his pointin' at your eye? What's your name, stranger?"

Pop grinned and pulled the gun out but he just held it in his hand while he talked. "Names ain't important when you're usin' your own. We'll bring the cows up in a day or so."

"Do that," said Dudley, and Pop holstered his gun and turned away, givin' me a growl when I tried to twist in the saddle and watch them.

We were nearly to the fence when I felt comfortable again and let Pop catch up. "Are you really going to bring our cattle up here?" I asked him.

"Of course. We'll lay 'em in here for one day only. That'll only cost us a thirtieth of a month's graze an' it'll give 'em a top start to make that forty mile stretch in. Of course Dudley don't figger on us leavin' so quick——. Let's go see that old timer."

IT WAS early morning when we drove the herd up on the ridge above Rainbow Valley. I figured we should have gotten through the fence before daylight in case of trouble but Pop had stalled and

fooled around camp and now it was broad day.

We only had four hundred head but they were the best of the grizzled old rancher's herd. "You've gotta be hard an' mean," Pop had said, and he had culled 'em fine. Even so, I hadn't seen him give the rancher any money. He just agreed to pay for them later on.

We could have bought more from other ranchers too, but Pop had turned 'em down. He said he wanted to take a few up to Dudley's first and see how he acted.

Dudley acted right quick. The three punchers we had hired were in back of the herd and I was almost as far behind with Dad 'way up in front. Still, it was my hat that flew off when the Winchester cracked.

"Swede!" I heard someone yell but I was nose down in the sage brush by that time. I glanced up and Pop's big black was loose too. He'd probably hit the brush before I did.

"Are you hit?" Pop bellered, and I answered real quick before he did something crazy.

"What's the deal, Dudley?" Pop asked and I knew he was all right again.

Dudley's voice came from a big nest of rocks. "How many cows did yuh buy?"

"Raise up an' take a look," Dad taunted. "We brought in every head we picked up in this country."

Dudley's laugh grated on my nerves. "Good! Now what are you gonna do with 'em? You can't make it to water after your dry camp and if you think the ranchers you bought 'em from 'll water 'em just try it—and if you think you're getting into this valley, try that too!"

"Man of your word, ain'tcha?"

"Yeh, what are you gonna do about it—Shorty?"

What with the thirsty herd in a hostile country. Dudley had us in a tough spot but he shouldn't have called Pop 'Shorty'.

"Little Steve," Pop called and I answered him. "Git the boys and let's round up the cattle. It's a long ways home."

I yelled "All right," and slid back through the brush, staying very low. I finally got the boys to work and we pulled the herd together but still Dad hadn't showed up. I started the herd along, then slipped back to the fence on foot. Sure enough, I had hardly reached it when the shootin' started.

Pop always liked big things and I could hear the long roll of his old buffalo gun above the sharp crack of the Winchesters. He shot four times, then changed to his six-shooter.

"That damn Swede's dead," he yelled. "Hold your gun on that pile of rocks while I go burn out Dudley."

I didn't have no gun so I just crouched there and listened. Pretty soon I heard

two more shots together and Pop a cussin'. "C'mon in," he yelled. "I got the Red-headed son of a——!"

I expected to find Dudley dead but he was leanin' against the rocks holdin' his side and lookin' sick. Dad had his gun in his left hand and was tryin' to stop the bleeding from a furrow across his neck.

"You had too many rocks to guard," Pop said. "You should have hid between maybe two of em. Jerk his shirt off Steve, an' let's see about that side.

I took the guns away first and handed Pop another neckerchief. Then I helped Dudley out of his bloody shirt.

"Oh-oh," exclaimed Pop. "He's got black hair on his chest! Now, how could that be?"

I could have told him. The red on the guy's hair was dye.

"Thought it would be that way," Pop says and his gun came up. You shot Pete in the back in Abilene. Big Steve an' I was tryin' to git you 'fore the sheriff did. We almost made it too, but you got away. I might as well finish the job."

I remembered how Uncle Pete would scratch at his left shoulder in rainy weather but I kinda felt sorry for Dudley.

DAD'S eyes were narrowed and he eased the gun up deliberately like he was shootin' the head off a rattlesnake. Dudley began to sweat. "You've ruined my whole set-up an' killed my partner. Ain't that enough?"

"You mean you'd sell?"

"Sell? Hell, I'd give—"

"I'll buy it," said Pop real quick. "Yuh got 'im fixed up yet, Bub?"

I had him fixed and it was a good job. No more bleedin'.

"I'll give yuh thirty-eight hundred and fifty dollars for the valley an' leave you one hoss," said Pop. "You can leave now. An' your name ain't Dudley. It's Dupree!"

He counted out all of our cattle money and Dupree glared at it. "I won this valley in a poker game," he said "but I lost over eight thousand before the feller would put it up. It's worth real money."

Pop's gun came up again. "Pete'll shore like this," he said.

"I'll take it," snapped Dupree.

"Did he really shoot Uncle Pete?' I asked when he had signed the papers and rode away.

"Shore," said Pop, "But it was a general hell-raisin' shootin' scrape. He couldn't help it's bein' in the back. What he's pullin' here ain't no good though, an' that dyed hair points to snake tracks. Reckon he got off lucky—an' we got Rainbow valley!"

I tried to get Pop to tell what he was going to do with the valley but he wouldn't say. All I knew was that he'd sunk our money into it and I didn't like it.

We turned the four hundred head loose inside the fence and Pop sent the three cowboys around to the ranchers to tell everyone that had cattle to sell to meet him in Red Butte that night.

Pop buried the Swede and we ate dinner at our new ranch and by the time we rode into the swelterin' town of Red Butte they were all there.

Pop went up to the bar again and got ready to talk and even the widder Jamison came into the saloon part to hear him.

"I jest bought the Rainbow Valley," he said. "What am I offered for it—in cattle?"

That surprised them all. They had heard of the fight from the cowpunchers but didn't know what it led up to.

"I'll take thirty-eight hundred and fifty dollars fer the dang thing," said Pop. "In cattle at three and a half a head—an' I cull 'em!"

The widder spoke up. "This drouth has taught us the worth of the valley and we have plenty of cows because we couldn't sell them. We can buy it if we go in together."

The old timer was smiling. "I already made my payment," he drawled. "Yuh can give him his pick now 'cause they'll all be good cows on feed an' water."

So we got our cattle and were on our way home when Pop started braggin' again.

"It looks like rain at last fer the Red Butte people but that won't bother us. You gotta be hard in this game. Right down hard an' mean!"

RAMROD OF HANGROPE RANGE

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

Get yourself a fast horse, a hot runnin' iron and a pair of loud-talkin' Owlhoot guns . . . for Estampa's cattle war is ragin', and any neutral is plain buzzard-bait.

THERE WAS a baker's dozen of them, and the spot they'd picked was close by an old buffalo wallow where once, before the cattle came, a couple hunters had died under Comanche attack. The exact spot was a lone willow tree with a gnarled trunk and a limb high and strong enough to bear the weight of a good-sized man. A rope, its end fashioned into a hangman's noose, already dangled from the limb.

McAfee was last to come and he came slowly. No greeting came from the group. Their faces were, for the most part, indistinct in the gloom preceding full dark. None looked directly at McAfee, a tall and lean man in the saddle, but several gave him slanted glances that had a certain uneasiness——guilt, perhaps——in them. As McAfee reined in, one man said, "You sure took your own good time."

McAfee's eyes picked out the face of Will Jennifer, foreman of XIX Ranch and a leading member of the Association. A queer smile touched his lips. "I figured a hanging was no hurrying matter," he said, and shifted his glance from Jennifer to the man who was to be hangrope bait.

There was more guilt about the others than about Sherry Ames.

He had brass, Sherry had. He gave McAfee a grin, and an easy wave of his hand. A cigarette drooped from Sherry's lips. He was sitting on the ground, his back to the

gnarled trunk, a handsome man in his middle twenties. His hair was black, and a curling lock of it lay upon his forehead, for his hat was always pushed far back on his head. But as McAfee looked at him Sherry's grin faded.

"Hi, boss," was all Sherry said. He wouldn't beg.

The greeting jarred McAfee, and he rested his arms on his saddle horn and leaned forward. His gaze took in all of them, and he said mildly, "Thirteen against one."

Somebody stirred uneasily. A horse stamped and switched.

Will Jennifer said, "That's neither here nor there, McAfee." His voice was low, hardly above a whisper. Like McAfee, Jennifer had height and no waste flesh. But there was a stoop to his shoulders, as though the burden of the XIX was a heavy one. Jennifer had a hooked nose, a trap-like mouth, and murky black eyes. And, men claimed, guts of iron. "He's your man," Jennifer told McAfee. "We waited so you'd know it was justice."

"Justice without a trial?"

"No trial's needed. He was caught in the act."

"You're responsible for this, Jennifer?" McAfee asked. "You're taking the place of the sheriff?"

Jennifer's eyes glinted. "We're all in it together. You along with the rest of us. We're all Association members." He didn't like McAfee's singling him out. He nodded toward the mounted man beside him. "My boss is here. He's not calling me off."

His boss was Jeffrey Keith, an Englishman who had been sent over by the XIX's British owners, the Crown Land & Cattle Company, to manage the ranch. Keith was small of stature, retiring of manner. He had a sandy mustache and blue eyes that were often bewildered. He was a stranger in a strange land, and he lacked adaptability. He nodded to McAfee, and said, "I told Will that he might be acting too hasty, Mr. McAfee. But the others voted me down, as it were."

"Who caught Sherry using a running-iron?" McAfee asked.

"Jake Dolan," Jennifer told him.

JAKE DOLAN, the range detective, stood nearest Sherry Ames, a rifle in the crook of his arm. To McAfee, Dolan was a human coyote. He was a man who preyed on his fellowmen. The Panhandle Cattlemen's Association paid him a salary for running down rustlers, and a bonus for every rustler he turned in. Dolan had an Indian-dark face that was all bony angles and always looked hungry. His eyes were so pale a gray, they looked colorless. He never looked directly at a man. His thin lips were habitually curled in a leering grin. There was a story that Dolan, as a bounty-hunter, had turned his own outlaw brother over to the law down at San Antonio some years before, and he'd never denied the story.

McAfee said, "Jake, the way I count you're the thirteenth man in this lynch crowd. And the way I hear, thirteen is supposed to be an unlucky number."

Dolan didn't say anything. He gave McAfee a look, then looked away and kept on grinning. Will Jennifer said sourly, "Stop talking in riddles, McAfee. If you're threatening Jake, say so plain. But remember; when you threaten him, you threaten every member of the Association."

"More of a warning than a threat," McAfee replied. "I'm just telling Jake that one day he'll call the wrong man 'thief.' Take Sherry there. He's a little wild, sure. But he's no more thief than the next man. You've known him a long time, Will. So have I. All three of us rode for the XIX when old Jeb Briggs owned it and it was a Brazos outfit. Sherry and I didn't stay on after Briggs sold out, like you did, but we were with the XIX long enough to learn the cow game."

McAfee rolled a cigarette.

He had the sharp attention of them all, and brash Sherry Ames looked amused. Jennifer however was working himself into a black humor, and he growled, "All this talk. What's it for?"

"Sherry's dad was killed in the war," McAfee went on. "Briggs let him stay on at the XIX until he was grown up. I guess a kid learns a lot from a man who befriends him. Sherry learned to be a cowhand from the man who founded the XIX.

Sherry . . ." McAfee looked steadily at the condemned man now——"Sherry, you ever do any mavericking for the XIX, under orders?"

"Plenty of it, Ed. So did you. So did the old man's ramrod, Will Jennifer. Shucks; the XIX got its start through mavericking. We'd put the XIX iron onto two and three year olds and think nothing of it. Now if a man finds a dogie and brands it, some folks want to hang him for rustling. The same folks who used to swing a mighty wide loop over every cow critter that wasn't branded."

Jennifer muttered an oath.

"Dammit; that was different. Times have changed."

"If mavericking is rustling now, it was rustling then," McAfee said, striking a match for his cigarette. His lean face was amused in a rather sardonic way. He puffed his cigarette alight, extinguished the match, broke the stick between his fingers. He flipped the match bits away, then jerked his saddle gun from its scabbard. He'd levered a cartridge into the firing chamber and thumbed back the hammer before any of the lynch crowd guessed that he meant to make a real attempt to save Sherry Ames. "I stand by my riders," he said flatly. "Sherry, get up and get on your horse!"

His play was met in various ways. Some of the group, one of them Jeffrey Keith, seemed relieved. Others swore softly, taking this as a personal affront. Jake Dolan seemed tempted to try his luck with his own rifle, but decided against it on seeing McAfee's gaze upon him. Will Jennifer looked mad enough to grab for his gun. There was murder in his murky eyes. But Keith reached out and touched his arm.

McAfee said, "Everybody here has done what Sherry is accused of. Myself included. Mavericking was never considered rustling until the Association called it stealing. I'll not see a man hanged for what I've done plenty of times. You, Jennifer. All you can think is the XIX. It's your whole life. That's all right. But remember, the XIX got its start out of mavericking. Large scale mavericking."

Jennifer croaked, "Have it your way this time, friend, but remember something —no man can buck the XIX and not pay for it. You've slandered my outfit and I'll keep that in mind. You're through as a member of the Association. The rules say that no rancher can stay on as a member if he employs a known cow thief. You can't ask for the Association's protection from this day on."

He took up his reins, kneed his horse, coming to face McAfee squarely. "Sherry Ames put those calves in the Circle-Bar iron of the Border Cattle Pool, a renegade outfit. That means he owns stock in the pool, like a lot of other blacklisted cowhands. Keep on harboring him, McAfee, and you'll find that a rancher can be blacklisted too!"

He swung away. The others followed him in silence. Only Keith, the XIX manager, had a word to say. "Sorry, old man," Keith murmured. "In a way I feel that you are right. Was the XIX really founded by——"

He got no farther, for Jennifer called back, "Come along, Keith." And that proved, for McAfee at least, that Jennifer was the real boss of the powerful XIX.

They disappeared into the darkness, heading toward Estampa, a mushrooming Panhandle cowtown. McAfee booted his rifle with relief. They could have made a showdown of it, and only a secret sense of guilt had stayed them. McAfee knew that he hadn't really bluffed them. It was their own consciences which had saved him and Sherry Ames. All but Jennifer and Dolan had consciences, and those two had been held in check only by the reluctance of the majority. McAfee turned to Sherry Ames.

"Jennifer right about you, Sherry?"

"About me owning stock in Border Pool?" Sherry was slow in making his reply. Finally he nodded. "I've got three hundred dollars invested in it."

II

McAFEE knew just what he had to do, and he didn't like it. He liked Sherry Ames; he considered him as much friend as employee. Too, Sherry was a tophand with cattle and horses. Fall roundup was almost at hand and McAfee would need the young rider. But he couldn't have

a member of the Border Pool in his crew; a man had to protect his own interests. Sherry might not put the Pool's brand on any McF cattle, but the temptation would be with him every time he rode out alone.

The Border Pool——sometimes called the Revenge Pool and sometimes the Get-Even Cattle Company by the regular ranchers——was a new outfit whose range straddled the Texas-New Mexico line. It had been formed by a group of former cowhands who, for one reason or another, had quit or been fired from their jobs. All through the Panhandle during '83 there'd been men leaving their jobs, and some of these disgruntled riders had been blacklisted by their former employers and so, unable to find new jobs, they'd started the Border Cattle Pool.

THE Pool's organizers sold shares of stock in the company not only to blacklisted ranchhands but also to those still working for the regular outfits. Such men, working for one outfit and having a financial interest in another, could not be trusted blindly. Temptation was always with them. By placing an occasional animal in the Pool's Circle-Bar iron, they were helping the Pool prosper at the expense of their employers and thus were improving their own investment.

McAfee flung away his cigarette butt.

"If you had some money saved why didn't you ask to buy into the McF, Sherry?" he said. "Why'd it have to be the Pool?"

"Guess I was talked into it, Ed."

"A man that can be talked into one thing can be talked into another."

"So help me, Ed, I never misbranded a McF calf."

"I'll take your word for it."

Sherry's grin hadn't come back. He was frowning now. "You firing me?" Ed replied, "What would you do in my place?"

Anger stiffened Sherry's face for an instant, then he shrugged. "I'm obliged to you for saving my neck," he said. "So I'll keep you from doing what you always hate to do——fire a man. I'm asking for my time, Ed."

It was late when McAfee and Sherry reached home. The 'dobe bunkhouse was still lighted. The crew was waiting up to see how McAfee had made out. They'd offered to ride with McAfee but the boss had ordered them to stay at the ranch.

They came from the bunkhouse as McAfee and Sherry reined in by the corrals. Charlie Shale shouted over his shoulder, "The boss brought Sherry back——without his neck stretched!"

There was rowdy laughter, and the eight men crowded around Sherry when he dismounted. They shook his hand, slapped his back, told him that it was more than a no-good cow thief deserved. Sherry didn't respond with much enthusiasm, and suddenly the others quieted down.

McAfee said, "Sherry's leaving us, boys. He's asked for his time. If there's anybody else owning stock in the Border Cattle Pool he may as well come along to the office and collect his time."

He walked to the ranchhouse office. Sherry came in alone. Sherry was hiding his sense of guilt behind a forced grin. He accepted the month's pay McAfee gave him, though he had only two weeks of the month in. He stood by the desk apparently wanting to say something and not knowing how to say it.

"No hard feelings, Sherry," McAfee told him. "A man always does what he figures best. Take my advice and ride out of this country until you're sure that the Association has forgotten you."

"I'll do that, Ed."

"Luck to you."

"Thanks. I'm sorry you had to take a hand in it. You've made some bad enemies because of me. Jennifer and Dolan won't forget that you bucked them."

Sherry turned to the door, paused with his hand on the latch. "There was more to it than my putting the Pool's brand on those motherless calves, Ed. You know that Jeffrey Keith brought his sister to the XIX with him?" He waited for McAfee's nod. "I saw her in town a couple of months ago. You know how I am when I see a pretty face. Well, since then I've been riding to the XIX to see the girl on Sundays. A man like me can't get anywhere with a girl like Diane Keith but I kept trying. She was friendly enough, and we'd ride together or just spend the afternoon at the

ranchhouse. Keith didn't object but Jennifer did. Two weeks ago he stopped me as I was leaving."

"What business was it of his?" McAfee asked.

"I don't know. Maybe he's got his eye on the girl. Anyway, Jennifer told me to keep away from XIX headquarters. He said, 'Eat your Sunday dinners some place else, or you won't be able to eat at all. I'll gut-shoot you, sure.' I told him there was no better time than now but he wouldn't go for his gun. I stopped around this past Sunday. Jennifer kept out of my way. But Jake Dolan was there when I left, with Jennifer. I should've guessed that Jennifer had put that sneaky range detective to spying on me."

McAfee nodded. "Don't let the Keith girl keep you around these parts, Sherry."

Sherry said that he wouldn't, and added, "I'm just telling you how Will Jennifer works. He lets a man think that the showdown will come head-on, then it comes from behind——to catch him off guard. He's tricky, Ed, and you'd better watch out for some trick play. Well, s'long . . ."

Sherry went out, and a few minutes later McAfee heard him ride off.

McAFEE's ranch was at the northern end of Comanchero Canyon. Not so huge as the gorge of the Palo Duro, Charlie Goodnight's range, the Comanchero was however big enough to support many thousands of cattle. It was sheltered range, and the bitter winter storms that lashed the surrounding plains did not sweep into the deep gorge with its sandstone walls. It was more accessible than the Palo Duro, and that was its one fault. Both McAfee and Jennifer had scouted the canyon, two years ago, and their outfits had raced to seize the virgin range. McAfee had won the race by only a single day, coming in by the north entrance with his cattle, horses, and wagons. The XIX under Jennifer had arrived by a south entrance the following day. And McAfee and his crew hadn't been strong enough to keep the XIX out.

They shared the canyon range and the water in the dead-center of it, Los Cedros Creek, by silent agreement. XIX had thousands of cattle out on the plains as well as in Comanchero, but its headquarters was located at the south end of the canyon. And it was there in the canyon that Will Jennifer, who hadn't put the affair of the buffalo wallow out of his mind, made the first move to even matters with Ed McAfee.

Charlie Shale rode in with the news one afternoon three weeks after the attempted hanging of Sherry Ames. Charlie came in to headquarters at a gallop, and yelled excitedly, "XIX is stringing barbwire!"

McAfee rode out alone. He was armed, but he had no intention of drawing a gun against XIX. If it was as Charlie Shale reported, a warning would have to come first.

No warning would cause Will Jennifer to back down, but McAfee wanted to handle things in an orderly manner. The fight could come later, and McAfee had no doubt about it being a fight. XIX's putting up fence was an outright challenge.

The Comanchero was but a few hundred yards wide at its northern end but it widened out gradually to a full seven miles at its mid-point. Except for one stretch of badlands, the west side of its widest portion, the canyon was rich with grass and everywhere were clumps of cottonwood, wild china, hackberry and cedar. Fine red dust rose from a dozen different spots. XIX riders were cutting their cattle out of the mixed herds and driving them south. McAfee knew that more Jennifer's riders were working the south section in the same manner, except that they would be shoving stock in the McF iron north.

McAfee had no objection to dividing the cattle. He would go along with that if the XIX no longer wanted an open range. But Shale had reported that the fence was going up on the north side of Los Cedros Creek, the only year-round source of water, and McAfee had to share that supply or move his cattle from Comanchero Canyon.

There was a stretch of rock and brush, and when McAfee broke from it he saw that Charlie's report had been accurate. Lorry and Dunn, Estampa contractors, had a crew of fifty men——mostly Mexi-

cans——digging post holes and cutting cedar for posts. They had two big freight wagons loaded with barbed wire standing by, and they'd set up a cook tent. Little gray-haired Nate Dunn was bossing the job, and he said quickly, as McAfee rode up, "Don't start anything with me and my crew, Ed. We're only doing the work. John Lorry and I needed the contract."

"Who gave you the contract, Jennifer?"

"He did everything but sign it. Jeffrey Keith did that."

"Jennifer tell you to expect trouble?"

"He said I shouldn't worry, that he'd take care of any trouble we might run into," Dunn said uneasily. "But he rode off after showing me the line he'd run. I don't like it any more than any honest man would, Ed. I can see that he's shutting you off from your water."

McAfee nodded. "I'll take it up with the XIX," he said, and rode on.

McAfee dismounted by a small log-house over the door of which was a sign with the legend, burnt into the wood, THE CROWN LAND & CATTLE COMPANY, XIX RANCH, OFFICE.

McAfee stepped inside, and asked the sandy-haired young clerk, "Mr. Keith around?"

"No. He's gone to town."

"When will he be back?"

"Tomorrow. He never makes the trip there and back in one day."

McAfee frowned. It was twenty miles across the plains to Estampa, and he had the notion that Keith had gone there, on Jennifer's suggestion, to avoid meeting him. Jennifer would have known that McAfee would show up. "Jennifer?" McAfee said. "He's gone to town, too?"

The clerk said that he had, and McAfee turned out of the office. He hunkered down in the shade of the building and rolled a smoke. A woman was stirring around the doorway of the ranchhouse across the way, but it was a Mexican housekeeper and not the girl from England. McAfee had never seen Diane Keith, but, remembering Sherry Ames's interest, felt a sudden curiosity. It went unsatisfied, for the girl did not appear. His cigarette smoked, McAfee mounted and rode on. There was a wagon road from XIX to Estampa.

McAFEE rode into the town just after full dark, and left his horse at Gomez's livery stable. Estampa was partly unpainted plank and partly adobe, and it was growing as the Panhandle ranches increased in numbers and size. McAfee went to the hotel and asked Abe Froman, the proprietor, if Jeffrey Keith had taken a room. Froman told him that Keith had. The room was number eight.

Going upstairs, McAfee knocked on the door of eight and it was opened after a moment by a woman. He'd never seen her before, yet he knew her. It was Diane Keith. McAfee hadn't the slightest doubt of that. She was a slender blonde girl, but not too slender and not too blonde. A fashionable dress of a dark green material revealed desirable curves, and her hair was deep rich shade of wild honey. Her complexion was as yet unharmed by Texas sun and Texas wind, and McAfee recalled having heard a man once praise the fairness of English women. Here was a creamy complexion. McAfee got his hat off, and he managed to stop staring. He gave his name and explained why he was there.

"My brother and I changed rooms," Diane said, smiling. "The one I occupied first wasn't very comfortable. You'll find Jeffrey in seven, unless he's gone out without my knowing it. He's to attend an Association meeting tonight. You're our neighbor, aren't you, Mr. McAfee? We've never met, but I've heard so much about you. You saved Sherry Ames that night."

McAfee showed his surprise. He hadn't believed the girl would have been told about such a thing.

Then she surprised him even more. "Sherry told me. He thinks highly of you, Mr. McAfee. He regretted having to leave your employ."

"Sherry told you? When?"

"It was the day before yesterday. I met him while riding."

McAfee silently cursed Sherry Ames for a reckless young fool. He was in danger so long as he remained in the country, yet he was risking his life because of this girl. Looking at her, McAfee could understand why Sherry was being so foolhardy. She was the sort of woman men lost their heads over in more ways than one!

The door to a room across the hall opened, and Jeffrey Keith, wearing a tweed suit and smoking a pipe, stepped out. His sandy-colored hair was neatly brushed, his mustache carefully trimmed. He was a mild-mannered man. He was in McAfee's opinion a man too far removed from his own environment. Keith was a scholarly sort, not a man of action.

"Good evening, sir," he said to McAfee. "Nice seeing you again."

"I came to town to see you, Keith."

"Really?"

"About this fence XIX is putting up," McAfee said bluntly. "I just wanted to give you a warning. I don't object to the range being fenced. It's coming to the whole cattle country and it's a good thing. But when an outfit fences my cattle off from the one good water supply, I not only object but take steps. I'm going to tear that fence down, Keith. I'm going to tear it down with armed men, if need be. You'd better tell your foreman."

He nodded to the girl, started to turn away.

Keith said, "One moment, Mr. McAfee. I know nothing about the fence keeping your stock from water. Jennifer merely recommended that XIX follow the example of the other big outfits which are beginning to fence in their ranges. He said nothing about——"

"That's between you and Jennifer," McAfee broke in. "But if the fence goes up, there'll be blood shed——and some of it will be XIX blood."

III

THE PANHANDLE Cattlemen's Association meetings were held in a back room of Kyle & Bradford's general store, and ranchers came from a hundred miles and more to attend them. Half a dozen horses stood at the store's hitchrack, and twice that many before Murphy's Social Hall, Estampa's biggest saloon. McAfee watched four riders come jogging into town, and recognized them as ranchers from up by the Canadian. It wasn't the usual date for a meeting, so the one about to be held must be for some emergency.

A rider leading a horse suddenly appeared at the west end of Estampa's main street. McAfee saw it was Jake Dolan, and discovered the led animal carried a body across its saddle. McAfee thought, *Sherry!*

Keith and his sister came from the hotel at that moment, and over at the Social Hall a man at the batwings reported Dolan's arrival to those inside the saloon. A crowd was gathering by the time Dolan reined in before the Social Hall.

"Caught this rustler on XIX's upper range," Dolan said loudly. "He was camped by Sarbo Spring. He pulled a gun on me . . ." the range detective's voice took on an apologetic tone—— "so I couldn't bring him in to stretch a rope."

"What was he doing out there, Dolan?" somebody asked.

"Who knows? Maybe spying for the Border Pool."

McAfee flung away his cigarette and stepped down from the hotel porch. He walked to within twenty feet of Jake Dolan, then halted and looked up at the man. "Jake, if Sherry was shot in the back——go for your gun!"

There was a sudden backing away of the crowd, and a clear space was left about McAfee and the range detective. Dolan's grin faded. His lower lip quivered, and fear lay in his pale eyes. McAfee had never seen so much guilt on a man's face. Sherry Ames had been shot in the back, and no where else. Dolan didn't have to admit it with words.

Will Jennifer barked out from the saloon doorway, "You did right, Jake. He was a damn' rustler and the Association sent you to get him. You're among friends, Jake, and we'll side you." His voice carried to every man on the street. "Go ahead, Jake. Go for your gun!"

McAfee experienced a moment's clammy fear. Dolan was in front of him. Jennifer was off to his right. And the XIX foreman had called upon the Association members present to take a hand in it. There could be a dozen guns against his one. But the moment passed. The Association members were honest men even though they had taken steps against mavericking, steps that were without legal sanction. They were not men to turn their guns upon one already facing odds. There

was only Jennifer and Dolan, then, and McAfee took heart. He could get Jennifer, the more dangerous, first and then care care of Dolan.

"You heard your boss, Jake," McAfee said. "Do as he says."

Dolan licked his lips, shot Jennifer a coward's look. He knew that he had no choice, and slowly, very slowly, his right hand moved toward his holstered gun. His hand was touching the grip when Diane Keith appeared between him and McAfee. "No——please!"

She was closer to McAfee than to Dolan, and too, the range detective was still on his horse——and thus his position was suddenly much improved. McAfee's aim would be thrown off by the girl's closeness to him. Dolan realized that, and pulled his gun.

Will Jennifer's voice for once lifted to a shout. "No, you fool——!"

McAfee was moving.

He leapt past Diane, driving forward. His movement ruined Dolan's aim and also brought him to the detective's left side. Now Dolan was between him and Will Jennifer, and Dolan had to twist in the saddle or gig his horse about to get McAfee in his sights. Dolan looked sick with his fear as he swung his horse about. He fired too soon. McAfee's shot roared in quick echo, and Dolan, crying out, slumped over his saddle horn. His horse spooked, began to buck, and McAfee circled behind it and faced Jennifer.

"Come on, dammit!" he shouted. "You wanted in on it!"

Jennifer's face had a grayish look. He was staring at the girl.

"You're as guilty as Dolan!" McAfee said, his voice thick with rage. "You sent Dolan to kill him!"

Dolan's horse bucked him off, and the man sprawled out on his back. He wasn't dead. McAfee's .45 slug had merely caught him in the left shoulder. But Jake Dolan was feigning death. He lay motionless and limp. Jennifer suddenly took his gaze off Diane and looked at McAfee. "Another time," he said, and abruptly turned back into the saloon.

The crowd closed in again, the tension easing up. Jeffrey Keith was already with his sister. He'd joined her as the shooting started. He had his arm about the stricken girl. McAfee said, "Keith, your sister should be told that in this country women do not interfere in such matters."

He faced the Association members in the crowd which was swollen now by townspeople. "XIX is fencing my cattle off from water," he told them. "I'm tearing down that fence. I'm telling all of you, keep out of it. It's between XIX and my outfit and nobody else!"

He turned away and saw Abe Froman on the porch of his hotel. "Abe, see that Sherry gets a decent burial," he said, and, catching the hotelman's nod, went on to the livery stable for his horse.

THEY rode with six-shooters at their thighs and rifles in their saddle boots. They rode willingly enough, for McAfee had told them, before leaving the ranch headquarters, that he would not order any man into a fight. But even the cook, old Pete Vance, was along. Eight good men rode at McAfee's back. Only the dead Sherry Ames was missing from the McF crew.

McAfee had given the XIX a full day to back down, and it was sundown when he and his men arrived at the fence. XIX hadn't backed down. The contractor's laborers had half a mile of barbwire up, another half mile of posts in place, and a long line of post holes dug. The construction camp's cook had just pounded a dishpan for a dinner bell, and the workers were trudging toward the cook tent. McAfee saw no XIX riders.

Nate Dunn stepped from his tent. The contractor didn't wear a gun. He knew at once that his job here was done, and all he said was, "Keep your men in check, McAfee. I don't want anybody killed."

McAfee nodded. "Nobody'll get killed or even hurt, Nate, if you don't interfere. I'm sorry this will hurt you, but you shouldn't have taken on such a job. Jennifer been out today?"

"No. But Keith was."

"What did he say?"

"We're to let you tear down the fence. Keith's orders," Dunn said. "He'll stand good Lorry and Dunn Company's loss. He just left a couple of minutes ago. Well, go ahead. I don't blame you for it."

McAfee nodded to his crew. "Get on with it, boys."

The McF hands rode forward, removed ropes from their saddles, shook out loops. The riatas snaked out, cow ponies strained, and cedar posts came from their holes. In a short time, half a mile of barbwire was down, and McAfee thought, It's too easy. He couldn't quite believe that Will Jennifer would accept this second affront to the XIX. He needed more proof that the mild-mannered Keith had wrested control of the XIX away from tough Will Jennifer.

"Too easy," McAfee muttered, almost uneasily.

The night passed without the XIX making a hostile move, and so did the next day. Charlie Shale and Tex Harmon returned from a scout out to Los Cedros Creek at sundown, and reported that Nate Dunn's outfit hadn't left the canyon. It was in camp half a mile south of its previous location, but Charlie and Tex had seen no activity there during the afternoon.

A fence across the canyon at this new location would not cause McAfee any concern. He knew that a fence there would still allow him access to several miles of clearwater stream. The creek gushed from a small gorge cut in the canyon's west wall, flowed through a rocky stretch and the cedar breaks, and then watered a long section of grassland before it curved sharply southward through the lower part of the Comanchero which XIX claimed. Jennifer could fence at that spot and be damned.

He went inside to his bedroom, and started to get out of his clothes. It was then that he heard the approach of a hard-ridden horse. The beat of hoofs seemed to come right up to the ranchhouse. McAfee pulled his shirt back on, buckled on his gun-rig, and outside a voice called his name. A woman's voice.

She called his name again as McAfee opened the door. She had reined in her blowing paint pony at the edge of the porch, and McAfee, crossing hastily to her, saw that she too was breathing hard. She was mounted side-saddle, but she must have left the XIX in a great hurry, for she wore a dress and not a riding habit. And no hat. Her dark blonde hair was tousled. Her eyes flashed in the darkness.

"What's wrong, Miss Keith?" McAfee asked. "Is Jennifer up to something?"

The girl nodded jerkily. "My brother and Jennifer quarreled," she said. "About the fence. It started last night, after Jeffrey returned from ordering Mr. Dunn to stop work. Jennifer gave in finally, when Jeff pointed out that he had the authority to discharge him. That seemed to frighten Jennifer. He left the office like——well, like a frightened man."

McAfee nodded. "Losing his job with XIX would kill Jennifer."

"He rode out," Diane went on. "Perhaps he went to town. At any rate, he returned late today with Jake Dolan. Dolan wasn't even badly wounded. He has his right arm in a sling, but otherwise he's all right. Will Jennifer had been drinking. He was in an ugly mood." The girl shuddered. "He forced his way into the house . . ."

McAfee got the picture as she described how Jennifer had confronted Jeffrey Keith. Drunk and vicious, Jennifer had ranted like a fanatic. He had talked bitterly of all the years he had worked for the XIX. He'd made the claim that he alone had made the XIX the big outfit it was, and his complaint was that he should be XIX's manager as well as its foreman. He had admitted hatred for Keith for having been sent over to supervise the ranch.

Jennifer had cursed Keith, told him that he wasn't taking any more orders from him. He'd boasted that he would make XIX the greatest cattle ranch in the Panhandle despite Keith, and his first move would be to take over the upper half of Comanchero Canyon for XIX.

"He said that he planned such a move for a long time," Diane said. "He told us that the canyon wasn't big enough for XIX and your ranch. He hates you as much as he hates Jeffrey. He said that he was moving against you tonight. Jeffrey warned him against it. Jennifer laughed. When Jeffrey said that he would order the ranchhands to take no further orders from him, Jennifer drew his gun."

McAfee swore under his breath.

Jennifer had beaten Keith over the head,

hurt him badly, Diane said. Then he had sent Dolan and half a dozen XIX hands out to circle around and attack McAfee's headquarters from the rear. The attack was to come at two o'clock in the morning. Jennifer, with some more XIX hands, would attack from the south at the same time.

The man had left Luke Bole, the colored cook, to watch Keith and his sister, but Luke was loyal to them. He had helped Diane get a horse and ride out. "I wanted to warn you, Mr. McAfee," she said huskily. "I had to warn you. This is like a nightmare to me. I can hardly believe that such things happen among people who are supposed to be civilized!"

"I'm obliged to you," McAfee said. "Maybe I can repay you for coming to me. Now you'd better leave here. You'll be safer at the XIX, with your brother."

"No . . . I'm not going back."

He reached out abruptly, lifted her to the porch. For a moment he held her close. He could feel her trembling. Suddenly he was affected by her as Sherry Ames had been, as Will Jennifer was.

"I'll rid the XIX of Jennifer," he said recklessly. "Go inside."

He went to the bunkhouse, roused his crew, gave orders.

He returned to the ranchhouse and found Diane standing in the center of the room. He took a Winchester rifle from the gun-rack, filled his pockets with cartridges, then moved to the door.

"Put the light out," he told her. "Stay inside no matter what happens. I'll deal with Dolan's bunch first."

"There's no other way than to fight and kill?"

"There's no other way," McAfee said.

THEY mounted and rode out, McAfee and his eight men. A mile north of headquarters, the canyon narrowed to a scant three hundred yards and the canyon floor climbed to a gradual slope in the sandstone walls. The slope was the only easy entrance to the north end of the Comanchero, and it was this way that Dolan and his riders would certainly come. The night was dark, for there was no moon, but when the riders arrived shod hoofs striking rock gave sufficient warning.

McAfee and his men were hidden amid a tangle of brush and rocks, and they permitted the raiders to ride all the way into the ambush. McAfee gave them a warning, calling out, "Go no farther, XIX!"

Men muttered startled oaths. Dolan let out a yelp that was almost a scream. The range detective had only one good hand. He had to let loose of his reins and grab for his gun with his left hand, and he never got a shot fired. Charlie Shale's rifle shot tore Dolan out of the saddle.

McAfee yelled, "That's what you'll all get if you want it. Don't be fools. Don't die for Jennifer!"

One of the XIX riders lifted his empty hands high. Another and another followed his example. McAfee led his men out, and they disarmed the XIX hands. "Now get off your horses," McAfee ordered, "and start back the way you came——afoot."

There were muttered protests. Ranchhands hated nothing more than travel on foot, and it was many miles out across the plains by the way they had come from the XIX. But they had to obey. Six sheepish men left their horses and their guns——and the dead Jake Dolan——and started walking back up the slope.

"Easy," said Charlie Shale. "For XIX hands, they sure were easy to handle."

"Jennifer won't be that easy," McAfee said. "Not near so easy."

He knew that the real fight was still to come.

It was ten minutes before two o'clock by McAfee's watch. As with Dolan's bunch, he meant to carry the fight to Jennifer and he had his crew bushed up in a clump of cottonwoods. His plan this time was slightly different. McAfee had given orders to let Jennifer and his crowd ride past, then attack them from the rear. He was sure that Jennifer would have a big bunch of riders with him, and thus it would be folly to give any warning that would up the odds.

One of the crew whispered sharply, "Listen!"

Another muttered, "What the——?"

McAfee heard it, too, and for a moment

was bewildered. Then he understood the meaning of that roaring sound. "Stampede!" he called out to the others. "They're driving spooked cattle ahead of them!"

A man swore. The reined-in horses were suddenly nervous.

Out of the darkness loomed a rushing juggernaut, hundreds of McF spooked cattle fleeing before the riders who came behind.

The cattle thundered past the cottonwood clump, for here the canyon was wide and the spooked critters had plenty of space. The smell of them, and the heat generated by their bodies, were heavy in the air. Horns clashed, a trampled critter screamed. The plunging mass swept by, driving toward the ranch buildings, and McAfee had a moment's fear that Diane might leave the house and be caught in the rush.

But he could do no more than fear for her now. Behind the cattle came a dozen shadowy figures in the darkness. One rider was close to the cottonwoods, and some sixth sense must have warned him of danger, for he suddenly bellowed, "Watch it, XIX!" And his gun roared.

The XIX riders came wheeling around in confusion. Their shooting was ragged. McAfee said, "Let 'em have it," and his own rifle cracked. The McF crew raked the night riders with deadly fire from cover, and McAfee knew after the first moment that he'd won.

XIX riders cursed, screamed, yelled in helpless rage. They were knocked from their saddles, and their horses, some going down hit, were almost all spooked and unmanageable. Their return fire did not improve, and Will Jennifer's voice bawled orders that couldn't be carried out. Four of his men were already down. Jennifer rallied them and led a charge straight at the cottonwoods.

Their guns blazed, though they had no definite targets. They trusted to luck and the devil who led them as they crashed in among the trees. Tex Harmon went down off his horse, and Bertie Farr yelped that he was hit. Charlie Shale drove his horse at an XIX man, downed him with a blow of his gun barrel. It was in-fighting now, and McAfee booted his rifle and used his six-gun to stop a man who readied a shot at Shale's back. Then a voice yelled, "Pull out, XIX! We're licked!" It wasn't Jennifer's voice, but the XIX hands scattered on through and out of the trees.

The fanatical boss of the XIX crew was silent now, and McAfee could not make out in the darkness if he was among the five who fled. He hoped not. He hoped that Jennifer was one of those who lay dead. With his six unharmed men, he rode after the fleeing night riders. After perhaps a mile, McAfee pulled out and told the others to drive the XIX hands down past Los Cedros Creek and then call it quits. He knew that Jennifer was not among those fleeing. None of them was a man with a stoop to his shoulders.

McAfee turned back and, by the cottonwood clump, he gave the dead XIX men a bleak look. Jennifer? McAfee didn't see his body. It must lay somewhere among the trees or in the brush. He didn't search for it, for Tex Harmon was badly wounded and Bertie Farr, though only slightly wounded, needed attention too.

IV

CHARLIE SHALE was first to return from driving the surviving XIX riders back across the Los Cedros. With his help, McAfee got the injured men to the bunkhouse. There was no doctor at Estampa, none within two hundred miles, so McAfee had to make use of what crude surgery he'd learned in his years on the frontier. A carbolic solution and bandages were sufficient for Bertie, but a .45 slug had to be probed for and dug from Tex's wound. The slug removed, McAfee cauterized the wound with a knife heated until it glowed. Fortunately Tex was unconscious all this while.

McAfee was applying bandages when the rest of the crew came riding in. He said, "Charlie, tell them to hitch up the spring wagon and gather the dead. We'll return them to the XIX. You look for Jennifer's body. It's somewhere in the cottonwoods or in the nearby brush."

McAfee stayed with Tex and Bertie after the others had gone to carry out his orders. When Tex came around, he dosed him with brandy and explained that he would have to take it easy for a few days. He left the bunkhouse, then, and the lamp was again burning in his office. He strode toward the ranchhouse, his senses sharpened by the thought of the girl waiting there, and he was mildly amused on recalling how he had rebuked her the other night for meddling in men's affairs. Her meddling tonight had saved the McF. It had saved his life, and the lives of his men. He could never protest her meddling again. In fact, McAfee wondered, coming onto the ranchhouse porch, if he couldn't encourage her to meddle in his affairs all the rest of his life!

The door opened into the man-style parlor. The office was to the right of the parlor. The office door was closed. McAfee crossed and pushed the door open. He saw Diane across the room, pressed against the wall, her face a pale mask of fear.

Jennifer was at the end of the room, a gun in his hand.

Jennifer's face was beaded with sweat. His breathing was labored. The murky depths of his eyes had death in them. Jennifer was ready to kill, yet for some reason he restrained himself. "My horse was shot from under me," he said thickly. "You wiped out my crew. I came here to wait for you——and kill you, McAfee. And I found her here. You understand, McAfee?"

McAfee didn't speak or move.

"Her being here puts the winning cards back in my hands," Jennifer went on. "She's my hostage. The two of you are riding with me, and you, McAfee, are going to keep your riders from gunning me. If you don't keep them off my first shot will be for her. Unbuckle your gun-rig, McAfee, and let it drop!"

McAfee's fumbling fingers worked at the buckle of his cartridge belt.

The gun-rig thudded to the floor.

Jennifer grinned icily. "Now fetch horses," he ordered. "And remember every minute that this girl's life is in your hands."

McAfee got his own horse and Bertie Farr's from over by the bunkhouse. He found Diane's paint with its side-saddle over by the corrals. He led them over to the ranchhouse after adjusting the cinch on Bertie's dun. Diane came out first, then Jennifer with his gun still in his hand. McAfee helped Diane mount the paint, then turned to his own horse, a big gray, and swung to the saddle.

Jennifer said, "That saddle gun, McAfee. Drop it."

McAfee pulled the rifle from its scabbard, let it fall to the ground. Jennifer came down from the porch, caught up the dun's reins, put his boot toe into the stirrup, and heaved up. The dun's saddle gave on its loosened cinch under Jennifer's weight, and the XIX man was thrown off balance. McAfee was already in motion. He flung himself from his gray onto Jennifer's back, carrying him to the ground. It was easier than he had dared hope. Jennifer's gun had been at full cock, and his finger must have tightened on the trigger. The shot was muffled by Jennifer's body, into which the heavy slug tore its way. Jennifer was dead by his own gun before McAfee rolled off him.

McAfee picked himself up and said unsteadily, "Ride on, Diane. Get away from here. I'll follow you . . ."

She obeyed, and she was sobbing when he came up with her.

Nothing McAfee might say would rid her of her sense of horror. Only time could ease the shock.

TOP-HAND HANNIBAL

By HARRY GOLDEN

As ornery a range-boss as you'll ever meet is the son of old Butch Haskell. Just ask Smoky and Hump, a pair of waddies who may never laugh again.

BY THE time we had jogged through the scrub-oak fringe and reached the rim of Wattle Valley, Smoky Hall was too peevish to make a good traveling companion.

"So this is the kind of a country you 'lows we'll find a job in, Hump? Your geography musta got twisted somehow. If they raises any beef in this neck o' the woods, they don't do it above board an' in the open. They may nurse a few buttermilk calves in the parlor or keep an old milk cow or two in the sweetpea patch but cattle raisin' ain't one of the outstandin' industries of the locality. You can see that for yourself. The whole valley from tip to tip wouldn't make a brandin' corral for some of the outfits that flourish in the country I come from. I ain't seen nothin' that wears horns for so long that I'm gettin' downright homesick. Accordin' to information we gathers along our pilgrimage, that mess of shacks over on the other side there is Palacia, I reckon."

"That's Palacia, all right," I told Smoky. "And we'll ride on over and make a few enquiries."

"I wish we hadn't had to hock our guns," Smoky went on in querulous tones. "If we had 'em now we might stage a holdup an' get enough out of it to throw a feed into these bronks of ourn. I ain't complainin' yet about missin' a few meals myself, but I shore am growin' weary of ridin' a hungry horse."

We stopped the first old-timer we met in Palacia, and Smoky asked him in a half-hearted way if he knew of any cattle spreads in the country that might be needing a couple of good punchers.

"I reckon," the old-timer told us, "that mebby Butch Haskell could use one of you, anyway. He's got a bunch of stock over on his summer range an' his puncher quit last night. You'll find Butch down there in his shop at the end o' the street—or you'll find the twins, Mary an' Jane, there, an' they can tell you where the old man is."

We found the butcher shop, all right and we found the twins inside, sawing off T-bone steaks and grinding hamburger for the rush of evening customers. Smoky got bashful and tonguetied when he caught sight of the girls in their white aprons, and I couldn't blame him much. I had to do the talking for the two of us, and one of the twins told us that her father was out on the hill range, but that he should be back soon, and that we'd better wait around to see him when he came in, as she thought he could put us to work.

Smoky and I went out and sat on the porch to wait.

"My godfrey!" said Smoky. "Hump, did you ever see two beauties like them

before? As much alike as them two ox-bow stirrups o' mine. I wonder how their folks tells 'em apart. Our chances for a job is beginnin' to look pretty slim to me, though. In a mismanaged community, where fair young damsels like them does butcherin', they must employ babes in arms to ride after the stock."

We had a long wait there on the porch in front of the shop, as it was almost sundown when Butch Haskell came riding into town. He had a long gawky-looking kid with him, about fifteen or sixteen years old, and the two of them were splattered from head to foot with gray mud. They rode up and climbed off their horses at the hitching rack.

Smoky and I went over and made our immediate wants known to Haskell. He sized us up for a minute with a keen eye.

"I guess you boys'll do," he said finally. "I'll take a chance an' put you both on. I had a puncher over there on the range but he quit yesterday—'lowed the work was too strenuous for one man. I didn't think it was, but Hannibal here an' I have been over there all day draggin' critters out of the mud, an' I've got the other feller's view point now—it's a two-man job. You see, over there in the Pothole country there's soft spots this time o' year an' when the stock drift down out of the hills for water they mires down considerable. While you ain't busy snakin' them cow brutes out o' the muck you can spend some time repairin' fence. There's a shack over there on the range with plenty of grub an' a stove in it. An' there's a barn there, too, with lots of good bunch-grass hay and oats for your saddle horses. I'll pay you sixty dollars a month apiece, an' if you lose any of the stock in them potholes, I'll take what they're worth out of your wages, an' if you ain't got enough wages comin' I'll skin you an' sell your hides to make up the difference."

BUTCH Haskell didn't smile when he made this murderous threat, and I was in favor of taking him at his word. He was about six-feet-four inches high, and I judged him to weigh right around two hundred and fifty pounds in his shirt sleeves. He had arms like a gorilla's, and hands on the ends of them like a pair of hams. He had thick red hair that was clipped short all over his bullet head and that grew down the back of his neck inside of his shirt collar. Butch Haskell looked like a tough customer to me, but I told him we'd take the job on the terms he mentioned, hide peeling and all.

"That's fine," he said, and then he gave us the directions for finding the shack over on the Pothole range. "The potholes mostly are right there in that narrow strip of meadow beyond the corral. Take a look around when you get out there to see if any of the stock drifted back and got mired down since Hannibal an' me left. We watered 'em early an' hazed 'em back into the hills but there's no tellin' how many of them critters'll wander back before dark, just to drop out of sight in them holes. We got there just in time this mornin' to save four head that was down. I'll send Hannibal over early tomorrow to show you the range. Just stick around and watch the potholes till he shows up."

The sun had gone down, when Smoky and I set out on the seven mile ride to the shack, and we didn't crowd our tired horses much on the trip.

"I guess our job's going to be all right," I told Smoky, "but I don't take much of a fancy to our new boss."

"I ain't worryin' much about our boss," Smoky came back. "If we tends to our ridin' we'll get along with him; but what I *am* worryin' about is the kid. Hump, did you notice how he slides down off'n that wall-eyed pinto of his'n, an' keeps walkin' round us to size us up from all sides all the time the old man is talkin'? With them long, slim legs of his he put me in mind of a big sand-hill crane, takin' particular dimensions of a couple of tule frogs before swallerin' 'em. I wish the old man wouldn't send that kid over to show us the range. I got a hunch Cannibal's goin' to let us in for a lot o' trouble of some kind or other."

I laughed at Smoky and corrected him regarding the kid's name:

"Not Cannibal," I told him, "but Hannibal. Did you ever see a kid take after his father the way young Butch takes after old Butch?"

"No, I never did," Smoky agreed. "When he put on a lot more beef, an' when his white hair turns red, he'll be a dead ringer for the old man. I don't like to see stiff, short hair growin' all over a man's head, solid between the ears an' plumb down the back of his neck till the shirt collar hides it. I shore don't like the looks of this Hannibal kid, Hump, an' I don't like the looks o' that big horse pistol he has strapped to him. I'd feel a whole lot more comfortable if we had our own guns with us when he comes to show us the range tomorrow. From the way Hannibal sizes us up, I know he figgers to let us in for something, mebby a mite inharmonious."

"Hannibal is just a big, gawky inquisitive country kid," I told Smoky. "When we meet him again, he'll be wanting us to play tag or pussy-wants-a-corner with him. Forget him Smoky; and if you've got any worrying that has to be done, think about what Butch Haskell promised to do to us if we lose any of his stock in those pot-holes he mentioned."

It was moonlight when we got to the camp on Haskell's range, and we took a ride along the narrow meadow to make sure there were no cows mired in the holes. We put our horses into the stable and staked them to a good feed of bunch-grass hay and oats; and then we went up to the shack and cooked ourselves the first good, square meal we had had in three days.

Smoky and I were up early the next morning and we spent the best part of the forenoon snaking cows out of the mud with our saddle horses.

I wasn't thinking about Hannibal's promised visit, when we started for the shack about noon to get dinner; but Smoky called it to mind for me.

"I don't see the pinto nowheres around," he said, "an' I'm mighty glad of that. When Hannibal shows up, I want to see him first; an' I want to keep a leery eye on him till he leaves. Hump, that kid shore has got my goat. I never got a hunch so strong in my life before tellin' me that something was about to happen."

I was still laughing at Smoky's hunch when I shoved the door open and led the way into the shack. We had just about reached the center of the room when we got the first warning:

"Get your hands up, gents, an' get 'em up fast or I'll fill you so full of lead you'll break your legs tryin' to carry it. Now turn round quiet like. That's it! The intrepid Hannibal Haskell's got you dead to rights at last."

OF course Smoky and I both knew that our captor was the intrepid Hannibal even before we turned around to see him. We hadn't heard him speak before then, but there was something about his squeaky, cackling voice that exactly fitted in with the rest of him. When we turned we looked straight into the big, open end of that old six-shooter of his. We stood with our hands up, scarcely daring to breathe. We didn't doubt that he'd keep his word about loading us up with lead from that old mill if we gave him any excuse at all. I could tell by the businesslike look in his eye that it wasn't a joke he was trying to spring on us. He took two pairs of rusty old handcuffs out of his overalls pocket and tossed them to me.

"Put on them bracelets," he ordered, "An' be pert about it!"

Smoky and I wern't taking any avoidable chances just then. We put on the cuffs and stood there waiting for further instructions. Then Hannibal took a dirty, wrinkled scrap of paper out of his pocket and studied it closely.

"You're the birds I'm after, all right," he said, looking up from the paper. "Gentleman Gunnison," he went on, looking straight at me, "you're a bad hombre for fair; an' accordin' to this notice I gets a even thousand for runnin' you to earth. Blackjack Dorgan ain't worth nowheres near so much, only a measly hundred bucks. I might scalp him, same as a coyote, an' take a chance on collectin' the reward on him that way; but I'll take Gentleman Gunnison on in alive."

Smoky found his voice then and put up about as good an argument as I ever heard him make.

"I concedes you got the drop on me, Mr. Haskell," he said, in part, "an' I'll go along with you peaceable-like, an' not

give you any trouble. Seein' that you're goin' to take one of us in alive, anyway, it won't put you out none to take the two of us. An' if I was you I'd take particular pains not to muss up any so's we'd be hard to identify. I admits that a hundred dollars ain't much money for capturin' a criminal but it'll buy a lot of knick-knacks an' sich-like; an' it's altogether too much money to risk collectin' on a scalp. Scalps is all right for claimin' bounties on coyotes an' similar varmints, but any professional in your line can tell you that it's a heap different with humans. You're supposed to bring 'em in on the hoof, if possible. Anyway, you know, they might be some mistake about us bein' the parties you——"

"No mistake, whatever," cut in Hannibal with a grin. "When I takes up this business of trackin' desperate criminals down, I makes it a point to make no mistakes. But you puts up a good argument, Blackjack, an' I promises to take you in alive, providin' you don't make no bad breaks. I figgers some day soon to be the greatest human bloodhound in the world. I guess it won't hurt my reputation none to bring in the most of prisoners alive. I've started out pretty good—used lots of head work so far. I left my horse down the trail aways so you wouldn't see him when you come in an' get wise to me waitin' here. I wanted to take you by surprise. I hid behind the door there an' waited so's I could get the drop on you. Now you gents kindly walk out ahead of me an' get your horses; then we'll be on our way. No funny business now. I'll be close behind you all the time, an' I'm a dead shot. So if you're smart you'll take it steady!"

Smoky and I nodded and started toward the door. Then Smoky took what seemed to me at the time a mighty big risk. As he passed the kid on his way out he stooped down like a flash and from the floor picked up a heavy bootjack in both hands. As he straightened up he gave that bootjack a wide swing and let it fly. It caught Hannibal alongside the head just above the ear. The blow that sent him sprawling. He dropped the six-shooter as he fell but he landed near the wood box in the corner of the shack and he got to his feet with a stick of good sound hill-oak stove wood in each hand. Before Smoky and I could reach him he careened into action.

When I went down and out, Smoky and the kid were still mixing it up, Smoky striking with his hands bound together with the cuffs, and the kind swinging his clubs, dancing and yelling like a Comanche.

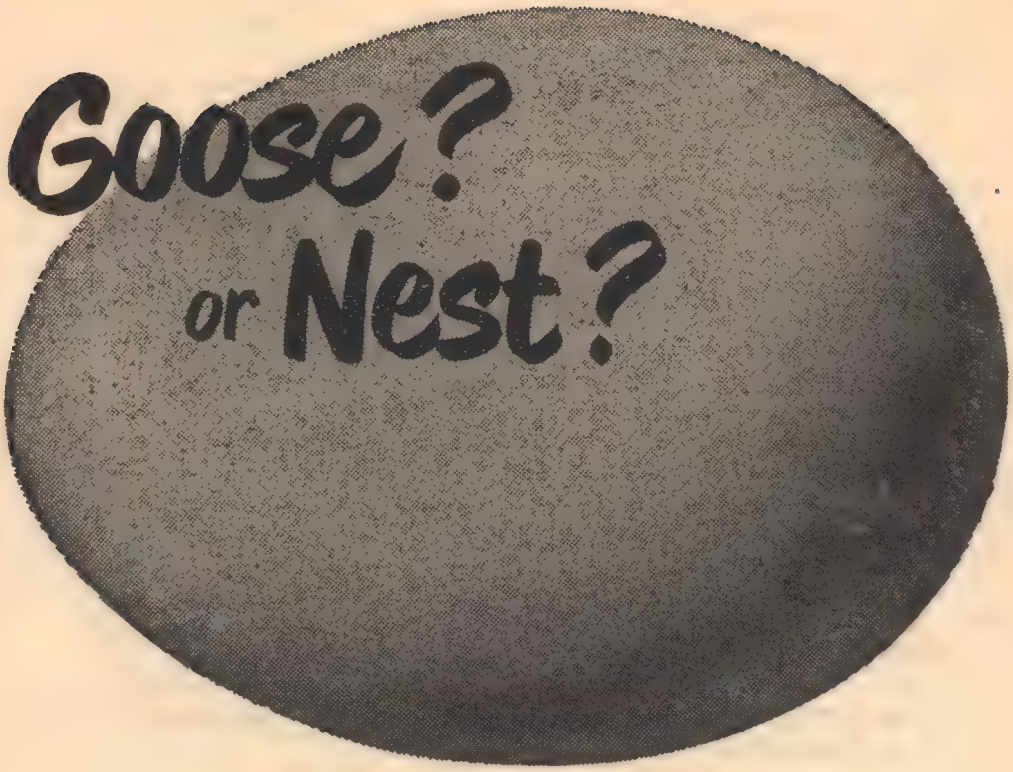
Smoky was harder to knock out than I was, but it took longer to bring him to later.

When I opened my eyes I saw that the kid had dragged both Smoky and me over to one side of the shack and propped us up against the wall. He stood with his big six-shooter in one hand and a tin dipper of water in the other. When he saw that I was coming around he left me and turned to Smoky. After receiving a good dousing from the dipper Smoky opened his eyes and gave the kid a sickly grin.

"I guess you've tamed us, somewhat," he said. "I'm ready to go peaceable now, as soon as this dizziness wears off a bit."

"I'm glad to hear that," remarked the kid, dropping the dipper and reaching for one of his big flop ears which Smoky had battered up considerably with the handcuffs. "It's a lucky thing for you that you knocked me loose from my gat with that bootjack. I guess, that if anybody should happen to ask you from now on out, you'll remark that Han Haskell's some battler. You gents mosey on out an' climb aboard your bronks now an' light out for town slow an' steady-like. I figger to ride close-herd on you with this old cannon full-cocked."

"ONCE" Smoky said to me, after we got started along the trail back toward Palacia, "once I got free transportation for six miles across the prairie in a Kansas cyclone an' let down in a creek bottom after bein' strained through a grove of sycamore saplin's. Once I followed a young cinnamon cub home an' crawled into the hole behind him to pay my everlastin' respects to the old she-bear; an' once down in Tijuana I got my skin full of mescal an' without previous trainin' or native prudence I climbed into the ring



WHICH WILL YOU HAVE ?

For some reason, the goose egg stands for zero . . . nothing.

The nest egg, however, stands for a tidy sum of money, set aside for your own or your children's future.

It's hardly necessary to ask you which you'd prefer.

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Automatic saving is sure saving—U.S. Savings Bonds

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an' took up an argument with a mad bull where a dead bullfighter had just left off. An'—but what's the use of specifyin'? I merely wishes to state that I see now that I never had any real excitin' entertainment before meetin' up with this impulsive Hannibal party. Whatever you do, Hump, don't make no move that'll get him started again. I've got about all, an' maybe more than I can stand for one day. You look pretty badly messed up yourself."

"I feel that way, too," I told Smoky. "And you can trust me not to start anything, Blackjack Dorgan. You were crazy to touch him off with that bootjack."

"I know that now, Gentleman Gunnison," Smoky agreed. "But before I get that bright idee of featurin' the bootjack, I *didn't* know it. I figured this here Hannibal was part human, same as any other kid, an' that I could knock him out. He tears down an' rebuilds the idee complete, as you, yourself, bears witness."

"Hey, you birds up ahead there, lay off that plottin'," Hannibal warned, and we jogged on into Palacia without further parley.

We trotted straight down the main street of the town, past a dozen staring natives, to the sheriff's office in the jail.

"Jim," began Hannibal, lining Smoky and me up in front of the officer where he sat with his feet cocked up on his desk, "I've got a couple of tough mugs here that are wanted in Kansas City, Missouri. I——"

"Good Lord, Hannibal! What have you been up to now?" interrupted the sheriff, yanking his feet off the desk top and sitting up straight in his chair.

"I've captured Blackjack Dorgan an' Gentleman Gunnison!" Hannibal explained. "I'm leavin' 'em in your charge till the officers from Missouri can come after 'em. You want to lock 'em up mighty tight an' don't let 'em get away. I get a thousand for Gentleman Gunnison there," he went on nodding toward me, "but I only gets a hundred for Blackjack Dorgan, which is hardly worth the trouble I had tamin' the hombre."

The sheriff still stared at us in surprise, till Hannibal pulled out of his pocket the crumpled paper that he had consulted back there in the shack on the Pothole range, and thrust it toward the sheriff.

"There's their descriptions," he said. "I saw them last night when they first come into town an' I got suspicious of them right away, them both bein' strangers in the country."

The sheriff took the paper from Hannibal and looked at it carefully.

"Where did you get this?" he asked.

"Why, it's one you threw out in the woodshed. I seen you didn't want it anymore so I took it along the other day to see if I couldn't pick up some of the tough birds——"

"So, this little gent here is the one you figger might be Gentleman Gunnison?" The sheriff glanced up at me from another examination of the smudged paper. "Are you Gentleman Gunnison?" he asked me with the hint of a grin beginning to pucker his eyelids.

"Not if I know——"

"Sure that's Gentleman Gunnison. Looks like the picture, don't he?" Hannibal interrupted.

"This picture's pretty well messed up," remarked the sheriff. "But for that matter, so is your suspect. Something seems to have gone wrong with his looks," continued the sheriff, grinning. "Still, he does look something like the picture. But I'm afraid you've slipped up, Hannibal. It says here that Gentleman Gunnison is over six feet tall. This man of yours I should judge isn't much over five feet. And it also states here that Blackjack is forty-two years old. This other customer you've brought in to serve time for Blackjack's crime, isn't a day over twenty-five. They don't tally, Hannibal. We'll have to turn them loose."

"Let me see that paper," demanded Hannibal, snatching the sheet out of the sheriff's hand. He ran his eye over the printed descriptions. "I guess you're right, Jim. My mistake—they don't measure up. But," and he seemed to get back some of his lost hope, "maybe we can make 'em fit the specifications an' pictures of some of these other tough mugs in here."

"No use," the sheriff discouraged Hannibal. "There's too many chances against you. Give me the keys to these handcuffs."

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Hannibal gave up the keys with considerable grumbling.

"Just my luck," he complained. "A lot of hard work for nothing, just because one of 'em is too short an' the other one is too young. They was bad hombres to handle too. Had to fan 'em both to sleep with stove wood before I could control 'em. If I'd had any shells for this old gun of mine, it wouldn't 'a' been so bad. I could of winged 'em right on the start, and then I wouldn't have got one ear knocked off with that bootjack. I was figgerin' to buy some ammunition if I got that reward."

"My gad!" said Smoky, speaking in a husky whisper. "Then that old six-shooter wasn't loaded?"

"Of course it wasn't," Hannibal came back. "If it had been, do you suppose you'd be here in person now?"

THE sheriff unlocked our handcuffs and tossed them onto his desk.

"Where'd you get these bracelets, Han?" he asked.

"Run across 'em in here one day, an' see you wasn't usin' 'em so I just took 'em along."

"Just what I suspected," the sheriff answered. "Reckon some day you'll come amblin' along when I don't happen to be usin' the jail, an' you'll take that along, too. Now you apologize to these two gents an' then clear out of here."

"What, me apologize?" asked Hannibal in shocked tones—"me apologize after gettin' beat up this away! I'm goin' to hunt up my old man an' tell him how they teamed up an' tried to murder me. The old man'll swear out a warrant for their arrest for assault an' battery, or else he'll wring their necks. He won't be a whole lot pleased to find out that they left his stock over there alone to get mired down in the potholes. I won't have much of a job talkin' him into masacreein' these two birds!"

"Well, I'll be—say, look here, Han, don't let old Butch in on this. Just tell him you fell into a stamp mill or something if you have to explain your appearance, and let these boys go back up there to the range. You got pretty well battered up, all right, I'll have to admit that; but you didn't get as much as you gave. You started the fracas, and it looks to me that you got the best of it all the way through. You——"

But Hannibal wheeled round and set off on his long, slim legs. "I guess old Butch ain't goin' to see no son of hisn rough-housed this away without gettin' revenge," he called over his shoulder.

"You boys better beat it, and beat it quick," advised the sheriff, looking anxiously at Smoky and me. "That fool kid will do just what he threatened, and old Butch Haskell——"

"You don't need to tell us nothin' about Butch Haskell," interrupted Smoky, "we already seen him! Can't you lock us up in one of your cages here where we'll be safe till after dark, when we can make a get-away. We don't want to be at large in your town when Butch comes huntin' us, an' I reckon he won't be long in gettin' started."

"Well, then you boys stay right here in the office till Butch shows up. I'll try to explain things to him an' if he won't listen to reason I'll stand him off till you have a chance to get in the clear," promised the sheriff.

Butch Haskell wasn't long in getting there. He came into the jail office roaring like a bull.

"What do you low-down coyotes mean by beatin' up my boy, an' leavin' my stock over there on the range alone. I'll——" He started for us but the sheriff stopped him and began to explain.

"Huh," grunted Butch when the sheriff had finished. "So that's the way the wind blows, eh? I might have known it first off. But I let that pesky kid get me all excited—he looked so sort o' well, devastated, I reckon would be the word for it. I see he's just took up another hobby, like the time he figgered he'd be a bandit an' set out to hold up the stage down there in the gulch." Butch Haskell turned to Smoky and me. "You boys fork them bronks o' yourn pronto, an' hit out for the Pothole range before any o' them cow brutes gets mired down so deep in that mud you can't get at their horns to yank 'em back out. An' here, take this ten spot to buy some arnica an' soothin' syrup an'

such; an' accept my apologies an' regrets. My Godfrey, why didn't you murder that kid, when you had the excuse an' the chance?"

"I remember when we had the excuse," retorted Smoky; "but I can't seem to recall havin' the chance. We done our best Mr. Haskell, but our best wasn't good enough."

Butch Haskell grinned.

"I should have warned you, an' give you a shotgun to take along. I'll send Hannibal over again in the mornin'. Don't let him get away with any more rough stuff."

On our way back to the Pothole Range that afternoon Smoky flicked the ash off a fancy tailor-made cigarette and winked at me with a swollen eye.

"This tobacco, now, Gentleman Gunnison, shore is soothin' to the nerves after havin' to skimp on smokin' for so long. Old Butch ain't such a bad boss, after all. Still ten dollars ain't much when you come to think of it. A man ought to get almost that much just for fightin' a ordinary, every-day grizzly bear, let alone Hannibal, the intrepid. But say," he resumed with a troubled look settling over his face once more. "Hannibal's comin' out again tomorrow to show us over the range; an' I got a hunch that he might take a notion to let us in for somethin' interestin' again. How's about settin' a deadfall for him in the trail, Hump?"

Town Of Whispering Guns

By TOM BLACKBURN

'Twas the kind of battle Cole Layden liked—one bitter gun-hand against a hardbitten crew that was gnawing away at the vitals of this once respectable town. Yet no one reckoned he'd be around long enough to enjoy it.

COLE LAYDEN pulled up at the pole bridge across the creek on the edge of Bellman and grinned satisfaction. He liked the looks of the town. It was newer than many he had known and more solid-looking, with an air of permanence and prosperity lacking in most of the one-street settlements he had ridden through in the course of business in the southwest. Old Jim McLane had always promised that when he settled down for the last time it would be in a good town. It looked like Jim had kept that promise. Cole wondered how much surprise the old man who had been his godfather and had raised him was going to show. Plenty, Cole thought. They had always been close.

Gigging his horse forward he started across the bridge. As he did so a sudden fusillade rattled in the air over the town and a mounted man came down the center of the street, bent forward and low over his saddle, riding with the wild recklessness of desperation. Behind him, six-guns out as they rode, were three other men. Layden reined off the town end of the bridge and onto a grass patch to get himself and his horse beyond the line of fire. For all its air of quiet and peaceful business, Bellman appeared to be accusomed to this sort of thing. There was a marked absence of curiosity or observers along the street, and Layden scowled.

This was not the way Jim McLane had kept the law in his home bailiwick in the old days.

Short of the bridge by fifty yards, one of the pursuers nailed the man ahead and the fellow skidded from his saddle into the dust a pair of rods from where Cole sat his nervous mount. The three behind the man pulled up in a flurry of dust and flung down. One, obviously more important than his two companions, kicked the downed man in the ribs, then twined fingers in his hair to jerk his head up for a look at his face. Swearing in a satisfied rumble, this fellow let the downed man's head drop back into the dust again.

Cole did not like the man; he did not like his kind. A gross, big kind of a heavy, protruding belly and a heavy, aggressive arrogance. Cole's mount was still dancing with nervousness stirred by the gunfire, and he let it move closer to the group in the street. The big man glanced up at him. His eyes ran slowly and meticulously over Layden, his horse, and his gear. Finally he spoke.

"Got something to say, stranger?" he asked shortly. "Something on your mind?"

The big man's two companions were looking at him truculently.

"No. I was just riding in."

"Supposing you go right ahead and ride on in, then," the big man said harshly. "Suppose you pull your nose out of this and keep it out. What's your business here?"

Cole waited a long moment before he answered.

"I'm going to have a talk with the marshal."

The big man studied him narrowly.

"My name is Frandsen," he said. "Most jiggers that want to talk to Bellman's law talk to me first."

"We've had our talk," Layden said shortly. "Now I'll see the marshal."

He kicked his pony and pulled away. He had the impression that the man who called himself Frandsen would have snagged his bridle and stopped him except for the fact that a small crowd was beginning to gather up the street.

Well into the town, Layden turned in

One of the riders leaped recklessly at the fleeing figure.

at the rail before a barber shop and swung down. He had figured his coming to Jim McLane's town all out as he rode northward. A bath, a shave, and a haircut, first. New gear from the skin out. A drink for the road. Then he'd hunt up Jim McLane and see how surprised the old man would be.

On the walk before the barber shop he glanced back toward the bridge. Frandsen and his companions had loaded the man they had knocked down back onto his horse, crossways, and were bringing him up through back lots. One of them must have had words with the little crowd. It had broken up and faded away. Growling to himself over the obvious brutality of the first three citizens of Bellman that he had encountered, Layden turned into the barber's. Something was sure as hell wrong with this town or with Jim McLane, or with both. Otherwise there would be no men like this Frandsen and his two companions on the street and no wounded man callously bouncing back up through back lots across his own bloody saddle.

THE barber was the closest-mouthed member of his trade Layden had ever encountered. Cole pried hard to get something out of him and then it was merely curt advice that a man did not wear a gun openly as Cole was wearing his in this town unless he wanted his ears fanned with a pistol-barrel and a session at the end of a shovel handle on the town's streets. Cole grinned.

"It's been my observation that a pistol-whipping usually happens to a man who isn't wearing iron," he suggested.

The barber grunted.

"Bellman's different," he said. "Been different since old man McLane swore Frandsen in as deputy. Big or small, iron or no, every man that's got crosswise of him has been hammered to his knees. That's advice. Take it or leave it."

"I've heard of Jim McLane from his Texas days," Layden said. "I wouldn't think he'd be buried in the same ground with Frandsen's kind. How did Big Belly get his job?"

"Shave around or just the sides?" the barber asked.

Layden sighed, recognizing the wall the man was hiding behind.

"Around," he answered. "Look, I want a new outfit, toenails to topknot. There's a dollar to top off your bill if you'll bring me a clerk from the best store in town—one who can take measurements and have everything I need here when I climb out of the tub."

"Your bill's bigger than you figure, Mister," the barber said. "Rates are up in this town. It costs money to do business here."

"A dollar and a half, then," Layden amended as he stepped down from the chair.

The barber went out. Layden glanced at the rate card tacked beside the door. He whistled. The barber's rates were high, all right, almost double the usual standard. He frowned, wondering what made the cost of doing business in Jim McLane's town climb. He shoved through a curtain at the rear of the shop. A tin tub filled with steaming water was waiting for him. He stripped and slid into it.

Hot water eased a man. In a few minutes Layden had quit worrying about what might be wrong with Bellman. Jim McLane was here and Jim knew how to handle a town. When he saw Jim it would all wash out to something reasonable.

Presently he heard the barber return with someone else. The curtain across the bath alcove stirred and a calm-toned voice reached through to him:

"You asked for a clerk, sir?"

Cole caught his breath sharply and slid lower in the tub—as low as he could get. The voice was feminine and the curtain between the alcove and the shop none too thick.

"Hey!" he protested. "This place is occupied!"

"I know," the girl said calmly. "You wanted service. I'm Lucy Minot, from Zimmerman's store. If you'll give me your measurements and what you want, I'll fill your order."

Layden calmed, grinning. He hadn't quite figured on this. This Lucy Minot had a nice voice. He wondered if she would look as good as she listened. Settling back, he started outlining his order.

He made it complete. When he walked in on Jim McLane, he wanted to look well heeled as the old man could see Cole Layden had done all right at his trade. He wanted McLane to see the roll in his pocket, too—a roll so fat he had to keep it choked down with a strong elastic band. Jim would get a lot of satisfaction out of Cole Layden doing so well.

Layden was calling measurements through the curtain to the girl when there was a racket outside. Bootheels struck the walk in unison and a number of men crowded into the front of the barber shop. One of them grunted sharply to the girl;

"Lucy! What are you doing here?"

"Selling an order of clothes," the girl answered. "With the way business has been in Bellman lately, I'd go worse places than a barber shop to do it, Tim Cardman. Mind your affairs and let mine be."

The man who had spoken and his companions came across the shop. The curtain swayed as the girl backed against it. Sensing trouble, Layden climbed hurriedly from the tin tub, took a pass at himself with a ragged towel, and reached for his levis.

"Get out of here, Lucy," Cardman ordered. "The barber just ducked into our meeting to tell us who was here. We got business with your customer—and you're not going to sell him any clothes."

"Meeting?" the girl asked sharply. "Another one? Windy jawing and plan-making when what you've got to fight you can't see, touch, or hear? The barber told me this man mentioned Mr. McLane—that he's probably another hard-fist MacLane is bringing in to keep us all in our places—but that's only guesswork. I'm selling him the clothes he wants."

"You hear about Jake Finney this afternoon?" one of the men asked raggedly. "Got crosswise of Frendsen and was dumped into the dust down the street with a couple of Frandsen's bullets in him. Laying up in the jail, now, with Frandsen waiting to see whether he'll live to stand trial on some damned charge rigged to make sure he can't get loose. You think we're going to keep on standing still for that sort of thing, Miss?"

"Pick Frandsen, then," the girl advised

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bluntly. "You say he shot Jake Finney."

There was a quick, heavy silence for a moment. Then Tim Cardman spoke again.

"A woman has got no business in this, Lucy," he said angrily. "McLane is the basis of all this. But he's got Frandsen between him and the town and we're not ready to climb Frandsen yet. We're not ready for suicide. What with all the fees and levies they've saddled on us, Bellman is going broke, so we've got to move. And the first thing is to keep McLane from building himself up a bigger force. That's why we've picked this new boy as the place to start our chewing. You get out of the way and back to the store— "

Feet shuffled on the flooring as the men there moved toward the curtain.

II

COLE LAYDEN wriggled into his shirt, looked regretfully at his boots, and hooked up his gunbelt. The silhouette of the girl's body was against the curtain. Suddenly she was pulled away from the hanging. Unwilling to be forced into a stand over a tin tub of water, Layden parted the curtain and stepped through.

The girl was the first person he saw, a little to one side of the opening. A slender girl with a lot of brown hair and large, dark eyes. A girl clad in a long, dark dress with white collar and cuffs that had a distracting way of clinging to the lines of her figure. She was frightened, but trying to keep her chin steady. Beside her, gripping one of her arms, and with his features set in a look of severe righteousness, was a tall, handsome man with a powerful body and angry eyes that were set a little too close together in his head for Layden's liking.

Four or five other men were behind this one, whom Layden judged to be Tim Cardman, their spokesman. One of these others voiced a mild protest as Layden stepped through the curtain.

"I don't know—" he said. "Maybe Miss Minot's right, Tim. Better to be sure than hasty—"

"We've got to stop McLane somewhere and this is as good a place to start as any," Cardman snapped, pushing around the girl. Layden spoke to them all, then, quietly, jerking their startled attention from themselves to him.

"A hell of a town," he said, "in spite of some nice-looking things about it." He let his eyes touch Lucy Minot for a moment before going on. "Down my way a posse wouldn't drag a man out of his tub till he'd had a decent chance to finish his bath, at least."

"This isn't a posse, Mister," Tim Cardman said harshly. "This is Bellman, rising up on its hind legs to turn you right back where you came from with a lesson under your belt you'll remember. We've had enough of the trouble McLane keeps importing with buckos like you!"

"I know Jim McLane," Layden said. "I'd like to see him—more since I hit this town than before. But he doesn't know I'm here and I'm not in his pay. Jim and me don't work at the same trade. Never have."

"Lies are cheap in Bellman when a McLane man is talking!" Cardman growled. "Get hold of him, boys. Take him out on the street where we'll have a little room to work on him!"

"Tim—!" Lucy Minot protested sharply. The big man thrust her aside and took a step toward Layden. Cole stabbed at him with his eyes and did not move.

"You're going to need room, Cardman—a lot of it—if you lay a hand on me," he said quietly. His hand dropped to the butt of the gun in his belt. The movement froze every man in the shop—the movement and the subdued quiet with which Cole spoke. There was a moment of silence, then a man ducked into the shop from the street outside, warning in his voice.

"Frandsen and McLane are headed this way—!"

The group in the shop shifted swiftly, each man finding a place along the walls. A moment later the huge man who had kicked the wounded figure down by the bridge, shouldered through the doorway. Behind him come a stiff-backed figure Layden recognized instantly. A second deputy was behind Jim McLane.

The fellow pushed the old man and the

marshal of Bellman hit the door jamb. He caught it with one hand and stood in the opening, swaying a little. His eyes were on Cole, but they mirrored no recognition. Jim had aged terribly in the half dozen years since Cole had seen him. He was gray and thin and a slack fold of skin hung under his chin, robbing his craggy face of much of the strength once apparent in it. McLane said something. Frandsen glanced back at him with a patronizing tolerance.

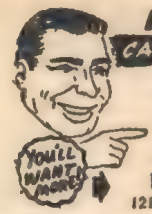
"More business for us, Marshal," he told the old man briskly. "Another spurred bucko, wearing a gun against the ordinance. Making trouble with it, too, from the look of things here. What do we do?"

McLane swayed again. The deputy behind him reached out. It could have been to steady the old man, but Layden thought the fellow's fingers closed altogether too tightly on McLane's arm. Layden saw that the deputy was actually supporting McLane to keep him from falling. The old man spoke thickly and with difficulty.

"All right, Frandsen. Lock him up—"

The big deputy came at Layden fast. Any other time he would not have been fast enough, but Cole Layden was rooted, unable to move. This was what was wrong with Bellman. Only it wasn't Bellman which was wrong, but Jim McLane. The old man was sick or poisoned or something. This wasn't the man who had taught Cole Layden how to stand on his two feet and handle himself like a man. This wasn't the sage old officer of the law who had preached to a kid that he should learn some trade other than the polishing of a saddle with the seat of his pants. This wasn't the man of whom half the southwest spoke with admiration and pride and to whom the riders of dark trails gave ungrudging respect. This was not the Jim McLane that Layden had ridden across two states to see. This was a broken old man too drunk to stand on his own two feet.

Cole did not see Frandsen's movement. The man's pistol barrel was chopping downward before he knew it. The iron slammed against his head. The room pinwheeled and exploded and Layden dropped down a chute into a vast pool of nothingness.



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THE Bellman jail was like the town itself in appearance, at least—new, substantial, and with a certain air of decency and comfort. But it hid something grim and frightening. As he roused Layden became aware of a man crying in pain and helplessness somewhere within the building and of a thin, evil-looking deputy who came down along the corridor to rasp obscene, taunting commands for silence at the unseen sufferer. Layden's head felt like a reverberating drum which was being beaten at an off-beat tempo from the inside. With exploring fingers probing gently at his scalp he discovered that Jim McLane's deputy, Frandsen, was a thorough man. Although his first blow in the barber shop had knocked Cole Layden headlong into unconsciousness, the man had made doubly sure of his victim with a second blow for which there was obviously no reason. There were two welts on his scalp.

As he came to his feet, steadying himself, Frandsen's voice rolled in an angry bellow down the corridor.

"Snavely, you damned fool, quit pestering Finney!"

Layden understood the man crying nearby, then. This was the man who had been shot from his saddle at the bridge. The evil-looking deputy came back along the corridor. As he passed Layden's cell he answered the man up front.

"Hell, Ben, never saw you shy from making a corpse before!"

"I'd as soon bury the whole town!" Frandsen growled. "But not till it's been skinned. Finney's going to be fined two hundred bucks in the morning. I want him alive till he can fork it over. You come on out front. I feel like some poker."

Talk of money jogged Layden's memory. He hastily searched his pockets. His roll was gone. No wonder Frandsen felt like poker.

Layden sank back on the cot, holding his aching head in his hands. A particularly nasty kind of hell had been pried loose here. He did not know how it had started or exactly what it fueled upon. But Jim McLane was obviously a part of it. Cole shivered. McLane had done little drinking in the old days and he'd spent a lot of time teaching Cole how to handle the stuff so it was firmly under his thumb instead of the other way about. What he'd seen earlier today—he judged it must be now well into night—just didn't make sense. It was nightmarish and incomprehensible and only one thing about it was clear. Jim McLane had been drunk at the barber shop, but that was only a surface thing. Something far worse than whiskey was gnawing at the vitals of this town.

He was still trying to order his mind and reach conclusive thinking when a sound drew him on tiptoe to the high, small window set in his cell. The sound came again—a cautious, whispered hail:

"Hello—you—Mister—!"

"Who is it?" he answered cautiously.

"Me. Lucy Minot. I've tried this twice before but you must have been unconscious. Look, you were telling me the truth there at the barber's about not being hired to come here?"

"Absolutely. Bellman was just a name before I rode in. I was not expected. I wanted to see Jim McLane, but on business of my own which had nothing to do with the town. I had no idea what was going on here—"

"I haven't, either, and I've been living in the middle of it," the girl answered. Her voice was low and intense. Layden wished he could see her. "Cardman and the others won't listen to me. They're stubborn and afraid. I thought that if I talked to you—"

"I'd admire that," Cole said agreeably. "Toss me up a couple of hairpins. The heavy ones are best if you've got them. Then get out back. I'll meet you there directly—"

"Hairpins?" the girl said, startled. "Out back? Are they turning you loose?"

"Not on purpose," Cole told her wryly. "Just toss up those pins. I think I can catch them."

SITTING back on his cot, Cole Layden reshaped with practiced fingers the wire loops the girl had doubtfully offered. A lock was designed for one of two purposes—to keep others in or to keep others out. And design did not vary greatly for either purpose. Occasionally a lock, with

the perversity of any mechanical contrivance, broke down or did the reverse of what it was supposed to do. Occasionally a bank vault was locked and could not be unlocked or was opened and could not again be closed. Over an area of a couple of states and a territory, there were safes and vaults getting out of repair often enough so that a man who understood them and could cure their ailments could make a good living. This was Cole Layden's profession. This was the way he had earned the fees which had made up the fat roll Frandsen had taken from him when he had been locked in jail.

Working by touch, Cole set to work. The wire was too flexible and gave him trouble for a moment.

The girl was standing in the shadow of the horse shed back of the jail building. She started violently when Layden touched her arm.

"Good heavens! You actually walked out of the jail?"

"Right through my cell gate and down the corridor," Cole agreed. "Right out the back door. And I left my jailers something to think about. I locked the gate and the door back up behind me. Now, I don't like the air around here. You know a better place for our talk?"

"There's a side street which runs off into open country. No lights on it. We could walk out that way—"

Layden took the girl's arm. They moved cautiously and in silence until the street she had mentioned petered out into a pair of wagon tracks reaching toward the sage flats. When talk seemed safe enough, Layden sketched his impression of the situation in town to the girl.

"Jim McLane is sick. Something's the matter with him. I'm almost sure of that. And he's being used as a mask behind which the town can be kicked around just the way Frandsen wants it."

The girl shook her head.

"You give Ben Frandsen too much credit," she said. "He's just a murderous brute with no brains. Vain and swaggering and prideful, but no brains. Tim Cardman and Mr. Gillatt and some of the others think McLane is doing the plan-

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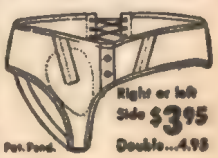

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ning and making it appear that his big deputy is pushing him around. I don't know about that. But somebody besides Frandsen is bossing the whole thing. And that's what worries me."

"How are they working?" Layden asked quietly.

"You saw it this afternoon when you came in," the girl told him bitterly. "You saw them chase Jake Finney down the street when he tried to slip out of town. Jake owned our best restaurant here. A prosperous one. He still does, I hope. Frandsen and McLane have set up a lot of ordinances. Frandsen went into Finney's restaurant this morning, accused him of breaking some health ordinance Jake had never heard of, and demanded a hundred dollar fine or the closing of his doors. Jake had more spirit than some of the others in Bellman. He defied Frandsen. Friends heard about it and persuaded him he was wrong. They persuaded Jake to get out of town till this cleared up so that he wouldn't have to face Frandsen again. Jake tried. You saw what happened."

"A marshal and his deputies might enforce town ordinances, Miss Minot," Layden said bluntly. "They could hardly make them, even here."

"It goes back a little. Horace Gillatt was our mayor. He was in the barber shop this afternoon arguing against Tim Cardman with me. Remember him—a little, purse-mouthed man? Gillatt hired McLane. McLane came in and made friends. This and his fame gained him support here. Gillatt had to resign from his office because of demands of his business. We held a special election and made McLane mayor. It was after he was elected mayor that McLane imported Frandsen to serve as his deputy marshal and handle that end of the town's business. The others came after Frandsen."

"And it was after Frandsen came that things began to get bad?"

"Yes. All sorts of ordinances raising license fees and town taxes pushed through against the council, with Frandsen's big shadow to back them up. Men beaten insensible every time they protested. It's ruined business completely. Sol Zimmerman, my boss, is nearly bankrupt, and he was one of the most solid men in town. It has gotten so bad that Gillatt recently went down to the capitol to talk to the Governor. He was told that we could have a recall, but that would be like a new election—no one would dare to vote other than for McLane and such items on the ballot as Frandsen and himself wanted passed. The Governor said that if things got bad enough he could of course send in the militia. That's what the meeting this afternoon was about—the meeting from which Tim Cardman and the others had come."

"The militia would accomplish nothing," Layden said thoughtfully. "It couldn't displace elected officers. And when the troops were withdrawn the whole thing would start right over again."

The girl nodded wearily.

"Aside from an open war right here on our street, there seems to be only one way to end this. McLane can't have been mixed up in this kind of business too often in the past or he wouldn't have the reputation he does. Maybe if somebody talked to him—if somebody made him see what he and his men are doing to this town—he'd break it up. You said you knew McLane. Would you talk to him?"

Layden swore under his breath, remembering that McLane had looked full at Cole Layden and ordered Frandsen to bend a gun over his skull. Sick or not, McLane would never be so drunk that he would not recognize the boy he had raised. Cole was sure of this—as sure as he was that none of this business was Jim McLane's doing. Still, something would have to be done—for Jim McLane if not for Bellman, and a man had to start some place. He nodded slowly to the girl.

"I'll do my best," he agreed. And as he did so a man seemed to rise out of the ground beside him. A gun was rammed harshly into the short ribs of his back.

"You'll do better than that!" Tim Cardman's voice rasped in his ear. "You'll trot ahead of this gun right back into town to the businessmen's meeting we're holding. You'll get up on your hind legs and you'll sing out every damned thing you know about this whole business—who

sent for you and why you're here. And if your song is sour we'll use the same persuasion on you that Frandsen used on Jake Finney when Jake didn't want to pay his fine—a couple of slugs beside your backbone. Now, move, Mister!"

III

THE MEETING of Bellman's angry citizenry was being held in a large barn a quarter of a mile below the town. Outside the building it was dark and quiet. Twice, approaching it with Cardman's gun in his back, Layden was hailed down by sentries, and was advanced only on Cardman's guaranty. These were cautious, desperate men. There were a number of weapons apparent among those within the dim, lantern-lighted barn. Layden saw a small man with a smooth, round face and the quiet confidence of one who held the respect of his neighbors. The face was familiar and Layden remembered the man had been among those in the barber shop. This must be Horace Gillatt who had preceded McLane as mayor of Bellman.

Cardman stopped Layden.

"You fit somewhere in the center of this, Mister," the man growled. "We got to know just where. I was watching the jail, thinking maybe Frandsen's treatment of you was a blind and that he would let you go. A good guess, too. A man doesn't walk out of a locked brick jail unless somebody inside lets him out. You better talk!"

Gillatt and several others approached. The focus of the meeting turned toward those crowding about Layden. Somebody asked a question. Cardman gave a harsh answer.

"Pitt Eames? You're damned right he isn't here! He's had enough. Closing up. Pulling out. So now the town loses its jewelry store."

Gillatt shook his head.

"We're just losing Eames, Tim," he said. "Not the store. I slapped a quick mortgage on my place and bought Pitt's stock. I'll try to keep the place going. Bellman needs it."

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thing, Gillatt," a man in the crowd said. "You picked up Markland's shoe store when he pulled out, too. You can't keep it up. It'll spread you too thin, the way business is. How I see this, it's got to be every man for himself. If McLane and Frandsen are aiming to kill this town, we can't keep it alive."

Gillatt shrugged.

"A man that lies down is licked. Each of us have got to do what we can. I can't handle a gun but I'll keep that pair from closing every door on our street as long as my luck and my money hold out."

Two or three of those present pressed around Gillatt, nodding in gratitude for his interest and his efforts. Layden was also impressed by the ex-mayor's stubborn, unafraid determination. He thought Gillatt had sand. There were many men who would spend powder to settle a problem but who would balk at spending money for the same purpose.

"You saved Eames' skin, Horace," Cardman said. "His only other hope would have been an auction, and how high would bids go in a town that's whipped to its knees? The point is, none of us have got enough money, including you, to keep on buying out those that run. We got to hit back harder than that. Look, I picked this jigger up out in the brush. Watched him walk right out the back door of the jail. Frandsen's through with him, I guess, but I figured we might have a little use for him."

"Let's get this straight," Layden said. "I tried to tell you before, Cardman. A couple of Miss Minot's hairpins let me out of the jail a while ago. Not Frandsen. And I left locked doors behind me. When Frandsen discovers I'm gone he's going to be more troubled than you are over it."

"Hairpins are no good against bricks," Gillatt said.

"No," Layden agreed. "But they work all right with locks—when that's a man's business. Look, this is a meeting of men who want to do something about a problem. I'm not part of that problem. If you want proof of how I got out of the jail, I'll start with your bank and work myself from the front door right into the vault, but you'd save time—all of you—if you'd just do a little believing. I got slammed into the jail because I don't fit into the game Frandsen is playing here. I got out again because Miss Minot seemed willing to talk to me and I thought I could find out something. Then Cardman came along, trailing me, and picked me up before I'd got more than started thinking this out. Just far enough to see Bellman is caught in a double squeeze. You're roughed and hammered and bled white of cash by fines and levies and violence which chokes off business. Then, when you go up against the wall, one by one, somebody is going to pick up your stores and business at fractional values. There's where your trouble lies—not in what Frandsen is doing, but in why he's doing it. And who he's doing it for!"

"You weren't brought here to deliver us a lecture about something we can see plain enough ourselves," Cardman growled. "Personally, I don't want any part of you or of anything you've got to say. You've already admitted McLane is a friend of yours. Now you sing like you're on our side of the fence. McLane would like that fine—having a man of his own right in the middle of us. This is too old a trick to work!"

"It's a suspicious mind, Cardman, that sees a trick in everything!" Layden snapped. "I owe Frandsen for two nasty cracks with a pistol barrel on my head, if nothing else. And I'm going to see him paid for them and for a couple of other things, too. Stand or sit, the rest of you. I don't give a damn. But I'm in the saddle with you and I'm going to stay there!"

Cardman's face darkened. Layden was aware that the man's hostility was in part due to finding him alone out on the grass with Lucy Minot. If there was anything more to it, this was too early to know. Gillatt shoved forward, checking the younger man.

"Shut up, Tim!" he said shortly. "You've had your say. The rest of us belong to this town, too." Turning to Layden, Gillatt eyed him shrewdly. "You sound like a man who can think on his feet," he went on. "You've hit the thing we're facing here right on the nose. And you sound

like you mean to buy a piece of our trouble. Maybe you've figured out how we can cure what's eating us, too."

"MAYBE," Layden agreed. "Not with guns. Not against an outfit like the one Frandsen seems to be bossing. They've got the law behind them. Knock one over and you're tagged for murder. At the same time, if one of you gets killed in the attempt, you've got no comeback. It looks to me like trying to run Frandsen and the rest out of Bellman with gunsmoke would be playing right into their hands."

Gillatt nodded, obviously pleased.

"There's good judgment!" he said to the others. "What I've been telling you from the start. Violence is the worst thing to try. We've got to find another way."

"The hell with that!" Tim Cardman protested angrily. "We've stood still and watched them choke off our town and our living, and my belly is full to the navel! Maybe you got more to lose, Gillatt, or maybe you walk quieter than I know how to do, but we've talked enough. I say we got to strap on iron and make our try at burning the shirttails of the whole bunch till what's left of them runs. And now's the time to start!"

A low growl of approval ran through the crowd. Watching Gillatt, Layden thought the man's disapproval faded a little, that he wasn't as opposed to violence as his statement indicated. He decided after a moment that the ex-mayor of Bellman was exceedingly cautious, trying with a businessman's instincts to be on both sides of this question of retaliation at once, ready to profit if the crowd out-voted him and succeeded in running Frandsen's bunch down and equally ready to point afterwards to his own counsel of moderation if they failed in any attempt they made. Someone slid into the barn. Alarm was in his voice.

"Some of Frandsen's men are prowling the alley outside—"

Cardman seized command. The lanterns were puffed. This instant blackness afforded Layden what he believed was a better opportunity than he could ever win

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with talk. While the attention of those who had gathered here was focused on the danger moving through the alley, Layden backed to the wall of the barn, moved along it, and in a moment reached a small side loading door. A man was stationed there. He called a soft challenge. Layden rasped a scornful command for silence and pushed past, opening and closing the door in a single swift movement which left the man inside wholly puzzled.

With the barn behind him, Layden moved at a fast pace diagonally across open lots toward Bellman's main street and the building which housed the marshal's office and the jail.

THE only light in the substantial jail building was spilling from the windows of the office across its front. Layden looked in through the window. Ben Frandsen sat in a deep chair, his feet up on the scarred main desk in the room. He was cleaning a gun. A couple of other men idly straddled chairs, watching him. Layden felt disappointment. Old McLane must be somewhere in the building. He started back along the side wall. Midway down, before he reached the ell of the cell wing, he stopped under a small window set too high in the wall for him to peer through. Dim light showed behind it. Just beyond was a narrow door set into the wall. He tried the handle. It was locked. He fished Lucy Minot's hairpins from his pocket and set to work.

In a moment the door swung inward, revealing a little room. It contained a cot with a rumpled nest of blankets, a table, and a chair. There were empty bottles about the room and a freshly opened one on the table. Sitting in a chair before this, head down on folded arms, was Jim McLane. The smell of whiskey was strong in the room. Cole Layden felt the muscles of his belly tighten.

"Jim—" he said softly.

The old man raised his head, swinging it toward the sound.

"Who is it?" he muttered. Then, more testily: "Who—? Damn it, is somebody there?"

The edgy old man's question and the slow swing of McLane's head hit Layden like a double blow. He cursed Bellman and Frandsen and the little, stupid men like Cardman and Gillatt. He cursed himself. His stupidity was more towering than theirs. In this one terrible instant he found explanation for many things.

Jim McLane was blind.

"It's Cole, Jim," Layden said in a ragged voice. "Cole Layden—"

The old man's head came up higher, almost to the high, proud carriage Layden remembered well. The voice strengthened.

"Boy! Lord, Cole, I'm glad to see you—" The old man broke off with a short, bitter laugh. "Ain't that hell?" he added. "Won't I ever get used to it? I can't see you at all!"

"It's all right, Jim. I'm here."

"The hell it's all right!" McLane snapped. "It's all wrong and getting worse! Boy, if I could see clear again for just one more minute I'd pick this one. I'd use my look on you. Way it is, you're a shadow against a black curtain and nothing else. Cole, I'm on the edge of hell!"

"I know, Jim," Layden answered. "Look, time is short. Tell me how you got into this. Tell me fast. All hell is due to bust loose."

"You're guessing, Cole," the old man said. "I don't have to. I know what's coming. I've got good ears left and I've heard it being cooked up. Till this minute all I could do was hope it would come fast and bury me deep."

Leaning toward Layden, McLane spoke rapidly. There wasn't much to his story, told in this way. And Layden had already guessed much of it. McLane was a man with a respected name and he had a fierce pride in it. He knew only one way of making a living. When his sight had started to fail, his vanity had made him conceal the fact. Bellman had not known when it hired McLane that the man's range of vision had been cut to ten feet or so and was still shrinking. It hadn't known that Jim McLane was against the first thing he had feared in his life—that his increasing blindness imposed loneliness and that he had begun to lean a little on whiskey. But before he had been too long in the town, some individual had found

it out. Some shrewd individual who remained in the background and who had seen a way to use McLane's affliction to take over the town.

"Not Frandsen, Cole," McLane said wearily. "That bloated killer wolf doesn't have the brains. His fist is on me, yes. Keeps me locked in here with enough whiskey to keep me numb. But he doesn't think up the orders. Some days it gets too much for me and I buckle. I did that today. Got drunk and can't remember a thing. But mostly I keep my wits and try to do some fighting. I listen and think. Somebody in this town—not somebody outside of it—has fixed himself a hell of a tangled way to get hold of everything on the street worth wanting. I wish I could tell you who, boy—"

"I knew you were marshal here. I didn't expect to find you were mayor, though," Layden said.

"I didn't ask for that!" McLane protested. "I tried every way I could to dodge it. Gillatt, who hired me to come in when he was mayor, saddled me with it. Seemed to think Jim McLane was too big a man to just be marshal of Bellman. Said I ought to be mayor. Better pay and everything, with not much work. Even got a couple of willing candidates to withdraw when he named me to run. And when the votes were counted, I was it, whether I wanted it or not."

"Part of the overall plan, maybe," Layden suggested. "Maybe Gillatt's the big spoke in the whole damned wheel."

"I don't think so," McLane said. "I've thought of it, but it don't fit. Gillatt's too careful and cautious."

"Tim Cardman, then," Layden suggested. "He's got spikes for whiskers. Tried punching them into me already."

"More likely," McLane agreed. "Tim has got a notion he wears the biggest boots in Bellman. I'd be sure it was him if I thought he had the brains to plan out something like this and the face to carry it off. I don't know. He's been to the office out front a few times to talk to Frandsen on the quiet, late at night. That means something. But I don't know for sure it means he's the herd-boss. That's all that's

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kept me from getting to him some time when he thinks I'm dead drunk and out on my feet and tromping him to death in the dust."

Layden nodded sympathetically.

"A man goes to hell in a hurry when he gets up against something he can't whip, Cole," the old man went on after a moment. "It's a damned poor end for Jim McLane—and a hell of a thing for you to see after so many years, boy. But if I could get my hands onto the right throat for about three minutes—"

"This is something that's hardly started, Jim," Layden said. "It's a hell of a long ways from the end of Jim McLane. I drifted up this way for a long visit with you. I'm going to have it if the two of us have to whitewash this whole damned town, starting at the bottom and working right out through the top."

The old man's hand reached out and gripped Layden's arm. The grip suddenly tightened with alarm.

"Somebody's coming!" McLane breathed.

An instant later Layden's ears detected what the old man's more acute hearing had already identified—footfalls beyond a corner door connecting with the interior of the jail building. Gripping McLane's shoulder in answer, Layden slid swiftly across the room, hooking up an empty whiskey bottle from the litter on the floor, and flattened against the wall beside the door. A key rattled in its lock and the door swung open. A man stepped in.

"Ain't you toes up yet?" a complaining voice asked McLane. Layden recognized it as belonging to Snively, the scrawny deputy who had been tormenting the wounded Finney in the cell wing earlier in the evening. Layden let Snively take another step, then slid out from behind the opened door and struck surely with the whiskey bottle. Glass shattered. Layden dropped the broken neck and caught Snively as he fell, easing the man down. With a quick reach he stripped off the man's shell belt and gun and whipped them about his own waist. A little trickle of blood ran from Snively's hair down across one closed eye. Layden grinned crookedly. First blood for Jim McLane.

Reaching for the door, Layden was about to close it when a chair clumped at the far end of the corridor into which it led. Frandsen's voice came angrily down the corridor.

"Snively, what you doing? You all right? Sing out, damn you!"

Layden heard Frandsen heaving to his feet in the office. He knew the man would follow his deputy when there was no answer. For an instant Layden intended to close the door, retrieve Snively's key and lock the door from the inside. Suddenly he changed his mind. Removal of Frandsen would take Bellman a long step toward recovering from the sickness clamped on the town regardless of who was behind Frandsen.

Stepping into the hall, he eased the door closed behind him and braced himself to wait, his eyes on the doorway at the other end. A bracketed wall lamp midway down the passage shed dim light. Not much, but enough. This was not the thing McLane had taught the boy he had raised to do. This was not the kind of skill with which Cole Layden made his living. Still, there were some things a man could do because he had to. There were some things he had to try when there were no others who would make the attempt themselves.

Frandsen stopped, startled, a yard into the hall, his small, narrow-set eyes widening. He looked down the narrow passage at Cole Layden and cords ridged suddenly up on his wide, florid forehead. Even as the man's hands began movement, Layden spoke quietly.

"You've bought this—" he said, and he reached for the gun now on his own thigh.

IV

THERE WAS something incredible in the speed with which Frandsen's body moved. Something automatic and frightening, as in any reflex of the human body which is governed by instinct rather than thought. Frandsen saw before him a man. In his mind was the lightning knowledge that this was a man he must kill. It did not go beyond that. His body did the rest of its own accord.

He drew his weapon, fired it, and dodged

frantically back through the door at his back without waiting to see if his shot took effect. Even as Cole Layden pulled the trigger of the gun in his hand, he knew he wouldn't register a hit. Frandsen's bullet, loosed perhaps a shade too fast, struck the wall of the corridor a yard short of Layden's position, burred away from it in an angry ricochet, and knocked down plaster somewhere about the door casing at Layden's back.

Reaching behind him, Layden opened the door into McLane's tiny cubicle and retreated into it. McLane was standing fully erect beside the scarred table in its center, his head cocked anxiously to one side.

"Tried to vacate your chief deputy's job and missed, Jim," Layden told him. "We've got to move fast."

McLane started to say something, but Layden jerked the outer door open. He had a moment's glimpse of a shadow hurtling toward the panel. He slammed the door shut again and fired a shot through the thin planking. A man cried out sharply, swore with griping pain, and reeled noisily away.

"Seem to do better shooting blind," Layden muttered grimly.

"A man sometimes does, boy," Jim McLane agreed dryly. "Now, where was this place we were going to in such a hurry?"

Layden could not repress a grin. This was like the old McLane. This was like the man who was already becoming legend. The story went that Jim McLane could not be stampeded. It stuck. He could not be stampeded even when he was blind. Layden leaned over the table and blew out the lamp there.

"Ben's got a boy or two outside," McLane said. "My ears tell me. We can't go that way, but them out there won't try at us, either. They'll crowd down the hall from the office, directly. It'll take a little time. Ben will have to make up his mind what he's going to do—or he'll have to send to his boss for orders. You wasn't supposed to show up here in Bellman and raise hell like this, Cole."

Layden stood motionless in the dark.

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Muffled by two doors and the length of the corridor, he could hear talk and movement in the office at the front of the building. He would have liked to hear what was being said, but he knew the talk would make no real difference in the end. Presently the voices grew louder and he realized the door at the office end of the corridor had been opened, probably to make certain that his door was still closed.

"Met a girl this afternoon at the barber shop, Jim," he said softly in the darkness. "Took a walk with her a while ago after she'd furnished me a couple of female lock-picks so's I could walk out of the cell into which Frandsen dumped me. Nice girl. Know her?"

"Couldn't miss," McLane replied quietly. "Only one woman in this town that would be caught dead in a barber shop or passing hairpins to a prisoner in this jail. I'll have to take your word she's pretty, Cole. But I know she's got sand—and she's got a nice-sounding voice and she smells good."

Layden nodded to himself. It was a good description of Lucy Minot. He liked thinking about her. He supposed that in the back of his mind was the knowledge that a girl like this one existed somewhere and that he'd meet her some day. His plan to settle down eventually in a town which he could use as headquarters while traveling out to various jobs must have been mixed up with the knowledge there would be such a girl. He hadn't known before what she would look like and how she would sound. But he knew now.

"Mighty nice girl," he said thoughtfully again.

After that there was silence between them. Footfalls sounded in the corridor. Layden triggered a shot through the panel of his door and the steps hurriedly retreated. Talk started again in the office. Cole reloaded the fired chambers of his gun. The outer door of the office in front banged and talk rose to a high pitch, a newcomer's voice cutting through the others.

"What the hell's up, Frandsen?" the newcomer demanded. "What's all this gunfire about?"

Frandsen's answer came clearly back along the corridor, defensive and deferential.

"That damned saddle-bum I put to sleep at the barber shop got loose. Must have walked right through the brick wall of his cell. He got into McLane's cubby, somehow, with a gun. He's raising the devil, Mr. Gillatt—"

"I KNOW he got loose!" Gillatt's voice snapped. "With some lock-picks. Not through a brick wall. And I don't give a damn if he has got a gun. Get in there and quiet him! Cardman picked him up and dragged him into the meeting these fools had tonight. He skinned out when your snoopers came along. I had a hell of a time calming Cardman and the rest—talking them into breaking up and going home. They're about whipped down—about ready to give up and let me buy the whole town for a dime on the dollar. This kind of thing might get them all riled again and wreck my whole plan. If you're going to be marshal when Bellman is my town, you finish off that bucko in with McLane—and do it quick!"

There was a moment of silence, then Frandsen's voice came up unwillingly.

"You've heard the boss's orders, boys," he said. "We'll handle it in a rush. All of us together. Understand?"

Layden swore bitterly.

"Gillatt!" he said. "Gillatt's the snake to be heeled here, Jim. I should have seen it when I heard him admit to buying up a couple of the failed businesses here. He was the one one went to the capitol to get help from the governor—to make sure no help came from the governor, actually. He was the one who tried to quiet Cardman when Cardman wanted to pull the town down around Frandsen's ears."

"Even a blind man should have seen it, I reckon," McLane agreed. "A man gets so wrapped in his own troubles he can't rightly think out the troubles of others. Now it's damned near too late. Look, boy, if we—"

Footfalls coming down the corridor cut off McLane. Layden tilted his gun. And suddenly firing came up in a heavy roar all around the jail. After a moment it steadied to a steady exchange. Layden

heard shouts of surprise and alarm from those in the corridor. He heard them pound back into the front office and began to hammer lead in reply. McLane swore.

"The town!" he said. "It's got on its hind legs at last! The thing I've been hoping for weeks would happen. Our chore's off our shoulders now, Cole. Them on the streets will keep Gillatt and his hired killers busy."

Layden shook his head.

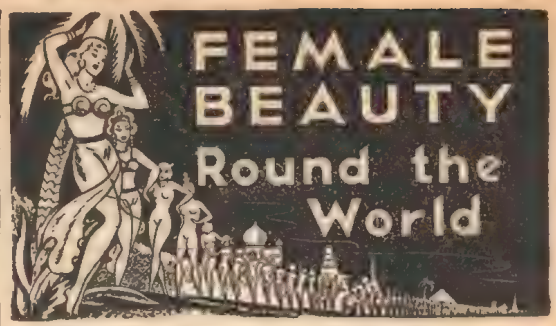
"Thick walls and little windows in this jail, Jim. I'm not so sure. I'm afraid Frandsen and those with him will burn this town down to its mudsills. They know how. We bought a piece of this, and I'm going to deliver our share. You sit tight here. I'll be back—"

Without waiting for an answer he hauled open the corridor door. Lamps in the office at the far end had been snuffed. The men gathered in it were directing their attention and their fire to whatever party was outside on the street. Moving with quick, long strides, Layden went down the passage, gun in hand.

As he reached the door of the office, a man whirled nervously at him. Layden slammed the barrel of his weapon against the man's head. Stepping over the body, he fired into the face of a second man, the force of his shot driving the fellow against a wall, where he buckled and pitched to the floor. A man at one of the windows rose, turned toward his companions and spilled headlong, much of his face torn away by a bullet from the street.

Flattened against the back wall of the office where he could not be silhouetted, Layden tried to sort out movement and shadow in the dark, gunsmoke-hazed room. He tried to locate Gillatt and Ben Frandsen. He knew they were here, but identity was impossible in the darkness.

Another man at the windows threw up his arms and came reeling back. He might have been soundly hit, but Layden clubbed him when he came within reach, to be sure. Suddenly the firing within the office ceased. A murderous toll had been quickly taken here. Layden had the feeling that the defenders had been thinned down to a few only. Maybe only two. The two



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which counted in Cole Layden's book. He began a slow movement along the wall, searching for these.

A man was breathing heavily, somewhere ahead of him. He continued his cautious movement until his tentatively outstretched hand encountered a sleeve. He started to swing his weapon up again before realizing he was in front of a window and partially visible. A widely sweeping hand, undirected in the blackness, wiped across his cheek with a force which flung him hard against the wall. Trying to regain his balance, he heard a shuffle of feet as someone located him surely and drove in his direction. A shoulder, dropped low, crashed into his ribs. A gun-flash stabbed at him, hammering lead into the wall beside him. By the light of the weapon's muzzle flash, he saw Frandsen's big, incredibly powerful bulk. And Frandsen saw and recognized him.

Layden went aside in a reaching drive. Frandsen, mouthing curses, fired at him, missed, and fired again, lancing a deep, burning hurt into Layden's thigh. A deep hurt and a blow with such impact that it spilled him clumsily. The fall saved him from another shot from Frandsen's quickly-shifted gun. And only then, when he was on the floor, with the boot-tracked planking for steadiness, did Layden get a shot away. The slow and patient kind of shot a man who could work long hours over stubborn locks had learned to make. No blinding speed. No magnificent skill. Just a hard, calm surety.

Ben Frandsen cried sharply with hurt, tried to draw another breath, and failed. He tried to walk across the room toward the door opening on the street and failed in this, also. With his own blood under his boots, Ben Frandsen died on his feet.

TROUBLED silence cloaked the Bellman marshal's office. The firing outside had died. Cole Layden struggled to his feet, wincing at the pain in his thigh. There was one more hand to play out. There was one more man somewhere in this room. He made a careful circuit but found only the dead and stunned. Beginning to wonder if a shot from outside had taken care of McLane, he decided to risk a light. Carefully shielding his hand as deceptively as he could, he rasped a match and touched the wick of a lamp from which a stray bullet had knocked the chimney. With the light he saw two pairs of boots protruding from under the desk. One pair were well worn but carefully kept and of the finest make available to saddle men. They were on the feet of Jim McLane. Layden bent to peer under the desk.

Horace Gillatt was there, too. He had obviously crawled into this shelter when the fire from outside began. McLane, following Layden himself down the corridor and walking blind into this room of violence and death, had found Gillatt's hiding place. Reaching in under the desk, Layden disengaged the old man's clamped fingers from the soft flabbiness of Gillatt's neck.

"It's all right, Jim," he said quietly. "Looks like we held the top cards when they were all down—"

The front door of the office burst open. Lucy Minot came in. Tim Cardman swaggered after her. Other townsmen followed awed at the carnage within the room, shooting looks of admiration at Cole Layden and staring in puzzlement at the sightless, erect old man they had elected mayor of their town.

"Guess we made it just in time to save your hide, Layden," Cardman said. "If I hadn't got the boys rounded up quite so fast—"

"Who rounded us up, Tim?" someone snapped sharply. "I never even saw you till we were ready to break down this door. Miss Minot rounded up me—and the rest, too. Said Layden had busted in here to do a job that belonged to all of us. Rawhided us with her tongue till we had to move. I don't believe you fired a single shot anywhere in the fight!"

Cardman bristled angrily. At Layden's shoulder Jim McLane spoke quietly—using the voice again that made men stand still and listen.

"I can't stomach a man in my town that coppers his bets by playing both sides, Cardman," the old man said. "I've got good ears. You want me to tell about some conferences late at night in this office

right here when a doublecross against Gillatt was discussed—or do you just want to sell out quietly and take your hay and feed business somewhere else in a hurry?"

Cardman paled. He looked at those about him, then headed for the door. Lucy Minot did not even turn her head to watch him go, relieving the worry Layden had felt every time he thought of the big, handsome Tim Cardman. Her attention was focused undividedly on Layden. Her hand was gripping his arm.

"If folks here will tell me what I can't see," McLane went on slowly, "we're going to be able to make this into some town. I owe it to Bellman and I aim to do it. But I'm going to need help for a spell. Cole, son, you came to stay, didn't you?"

Layden looked down at Lucy Minot. Deep regret roughened his voice as he answered the old man.

"Everything I want is here, seems like," he said. "But some of the things I have in mind cost money. Looks like they'll have to wait until I can work my circuit and fix enough locks to raise a stake again."

"What things?" Lucy Minot asked with a small smile.

"I'd sure admire to tell you," Layden said. The girl's smile widened. Her hand dipped into the pocket of her jacket.

"Supposing you do that now," she invited. "And take your time. I'm a good listener, and you don't have to go anywhere at all."

She dropped something into his hand. Layden looked down and saw the roll of bills with which he had ridden into Bellman, intact even to the rubber band.

"When Frandsen knocked you down at the barber shop," Lucy went on, "this rolled out of your pocket. I kicked it under the bath curtain and then picked it up while they were carrying you out. And I—I thought I'd at least be thanked for safeguarding it—"

Cole thought there was a glimmer of invitation in her eyes. He felt Jim McLane jog his elbow, and he dropped an arm over her shoulders.

"Like this, maybe—?" he asked quickly, before she could get away. He kissed her.

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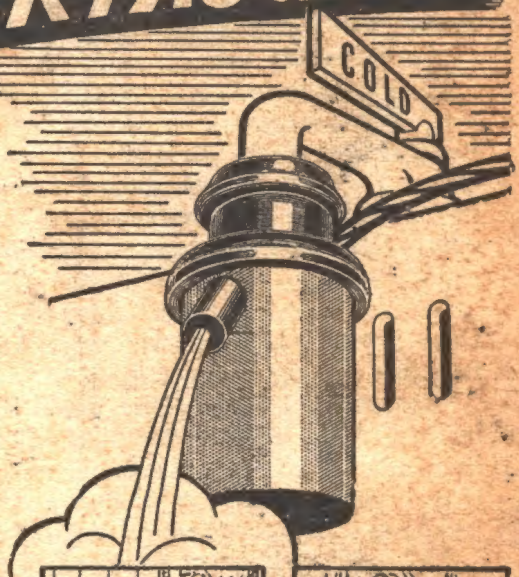

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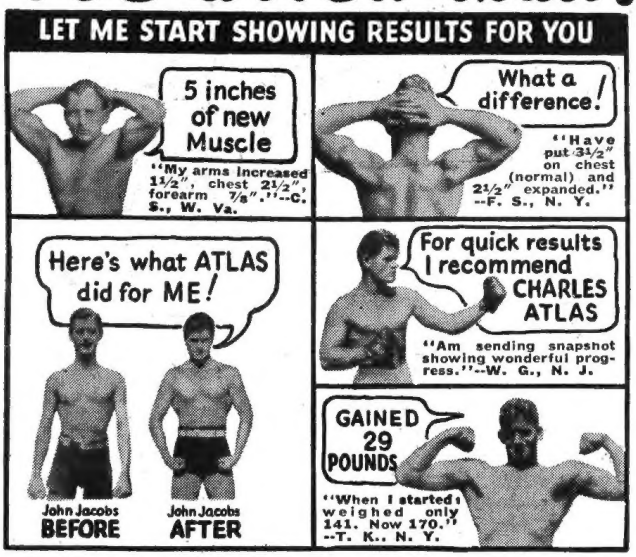
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In it I talk to you in straight-from-the-shoulder language. Packed with inspirational pictures of myself and pupils — fellows who became NEW MEN in strength, my way. Let me show you what I helped THEM do. See what I can do for YOU! For a real thrill, send for this book today. AT ONCE. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 172W, 115 East 23rd St., New York 10, N.Y.

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 172W,
115 E. 23 St., New York 10, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of **"Dynamic Tension"** will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

Name ..... Age.....
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City.....Zone No. (if any)....State.....

Amazing New LOW PRICED Electric Sprayer For Home Use *Makes Painting Easy!*

SAVE MONEY, TIME, WORK! GET PROFESSIONAL SPRAYING RESULTS!

- Paint Floors, Ceilings, Walls, Woodwork, Furniture, Toys
- Enamel Auto Bodies and Fenders, Storm Windows, Screens
- Varnish Table Tops, Linoleum
- Spray Moth-Proofing Liquids in Closets and Attics
- Spray Flit or Other Insect and Pest Solutions
- Spray Insecticides on Flowers, Plants, Shrubs
- USE VIBRO SPRAYER for EVERY Job of Painting and Spraying in and Around the Home
- Self-Contained Unit—No Motor, No Compressor, Produces Equivalent of 40 lbs. Pressure!

HOUSEHOLD ITEMS— It's easy to paint clothes hampers, kitchen chairs, shelving, partitions, slat fences, metal trash drums, etc., with Vibro-Sprayer!

OUTDOOR FURNITURE— Just the thing for painting rustic chairs, reed furniture, brickwork, boats, wagons, and other equipment!

ROUGH SURFACES— Makes quick work of painting concrete, rough wood or window screening!

INSECT CONTROL— Efficiently aids extermination of roaches, waterbugs, flies, mosquitoes and other pests. Fine for mothproofing clothes!

AUTOMOBILE MAINTENANCE — Provides the answer to quick, smooth touch-up work on fenders and body. Sprays light oils for under-chassis lubrication.

GARDEN PEST CONTROL— Ideal for spraying insecticides and fungicides on flowers, plants and shrubs.

JUST PLUG IN— PULL THE TRIGGER & PAINT OR SPRAY!

TRY IT 10 DAYS FREE IN YOUR OWN HOME!

Yes, now you can do a *professional painting* job on everything in and around your house with this amazing, brand new, self-contained electric paint sprayer. Just fill the big, 25-ounce capacity, interchangeable mason jar with any kind of ordinary oil-base liquid—lacquer, glossy paint, enamel, varnish, shellac, residual type insecticides, light oils, moth sprays, disinfectants, etc. Then plug the 8-ft. insulated cord into any 110-volt A.C. household outlet—pull the trigger—and get satin-smooth, professional results *every time!*

SAVE MONEY, TIME AND WORK

VIBRO-SPRAYER paints twice as fast as a brush, saves strain, fatigue, backache and sore muscles. Paint goes on FASTER, SMOOTHER and far more EASILY than with a brush. Adjustable spray control allows wide or narrow spray, thick or fine, as the job requires. Spray radius is always under complete control. VIBRO-SPRAYER cannot clog or drip—and is amazingly simple to clean. What's more, VIBRO-SPRAYER is SAFE! Will never break in use as there is NO pressure in the jar.

COSTS LESS THAN A GOOD BRUSH

Not only does VIBRO-SPRAYER paint faster, smoother, more easily than a good brush, but it actually costs less! And because VIBRO-SPRAYER applies paint more evenly and uniformly, you use LESS PAINT—save the cost of the sprayer in just a few months! In addition, VIBRO-SPRAYER shoots a fine, even spray into deep crevices where ordinary paint brushes can't reach, makes short work of rough or pebbled surfaces that are so difficult to brush.

MADE BY A FAMOUS COMPANY

VIBRO-SPRAYER is manufactured by the world-famous Burgess Battery Company, makers of popular auto and flashlight batteries. Every VIBRO-SPRAYER is guaranteed by the manufacturer to be free of mechanical defects. In addition, we guarantee that VIBRO-SPRAYER will give you exactly the professional, fast, labor and money saving results you desire, or you may return your sprayer within 10 days for full purchase price refund. You get FULL PROTECTION under this DOUBLE GUARANTEE!

SEND NO MONEY

Send only the coupon, now. When your VIBRO-SPRAYER arrives, pay the postman only $12.95 plus small delivery charge—or enclose full payment now and we pay all delivery charges. In either case you are fully protected by the manufacturer's guarantee of mechanical perfection, and our guarantee of complete satisfaction, or return your VIBRO-SPRAYER within 10 days for full purchase price refund. Send the coupon AT ONCE!

FOSTER PRODUCTS, INC.
179 Wooster St., New York 12, N.Y.

weighs only 2½ lbs.

Glass Paint Jar Holds 25 Ounces. If Broken Use Any Standard Mason Jar.

Comes Complete—All Ready to Use—No Extras to Buy!

ONLY **$12.95**

VIBRO-SPRAYER is completely self-contained — the ONLY unit of its kind on the market. Nothing else to buy, no hose, compressor, motor, tank, etc. Just pour liquid into paint jar, (25 ounce capacity) plug in and press the trigger! Size 8⅜" high, 6½" deep, 4" wide. Works on activated piston and suction principle. Built like professional equipment — does the work of a $100.00 unit producing 40 lbs. pressure!

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Please send a VIBRO-SPRAYER for 10 days no-risk examination. On arrival I will pay the postman only $12.95 plus small delivery and handling charge.

☐ Check here if you enclose $12.95 now. We pay all delivery and handling charges.

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